

A DASHING WILD WEST TALE!



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CHAPTER I.

THE STRANGE PARDS.

"I'VE never owned a foot ov gold land, an' I never want ter. I wouldn't take California as a gift. No mountain bonanza for this poverty-stricken chick!"

The speaker shook the long black locks that fell over his ample shoulders, and laughed till the rocks that surrounded him rung with the echo.

He was not alone.

He had one companion—a dwarf who cut a grotesque spectacle on the sleepy-looking burro that presented a marked contrast to the lithesome horse ridden by the man who rejoiced in his poverty.

The deep-set eyes of the misshapen individual twinkled with a singular light while the laughter gave vent to his feelings.

"You're poor with me, Crooked Tom," continued the man as he caught the dwarf's gaze.

THE BLACK NOOSE OF THE NEVER FAILING LASSO WENT ON ITS DREAD MISSION.

"We're not bonanza kings an' never expect to be, eh, pardner?"

The deformed did not reply, but his eyes suddenly fell under his companion's gaze, and he shut his hands convulsively.

"I see!" went on the man with his raillery. "I don't bank much on you. You wouldn't turn up your nose at a golden 'chimney,' nor run from a rich placer. My boy, gold's a curse!" And the speaker laid his hand on the dwarf's shoulder. "Ef you live you'll find it out, ef you don't know it now. This is Californy, an' we're in the gold range now—on accursed ground! What! don't you think so?"

Crooked Tom shook his head. "Gold is powerful, Eldorado," he said, as his eyes glittered avariciously. "How would you like to find a placer full of lumps like this?"

The dwarf's hand disappeared in his bosom, and the next moment he held up to his companion's gaze a rough nugget of solid gold, and almost half as large as his fist!

Instantly Eldorado Eph pounced upon it like an eagle, and cried as he snatched it from the dwarf's hand:

"Whar did you strike this? In the name of heaven, whar did you stumble on this curse ov Californy?"

"Where it was to be found," answered the deformed, who kept his eyes on the nugget which the gold-hater held far from his short arms. "And where there are thousands like it!"

"Don't exaggerate, boy," admonished Eldorado with assumed sternness.

"Why should I? Are we not friends?"

"Pards."

"Then, what good would a lie do me? You hate gold as I hate serpents."

"I hate the ground it lies in! I'm a pauper in the land ov gold. I hav seen the time when I could hav staked in millions an' I don't claim an ounce. My pards must be as poor as I am. Is this lump all you hav, Crooked Tom?"

"I haven't another ounce, but don't throw it away. Let me keep it, and—"

"No!" thundered Eldorado Eph. "You're richer than I am while you own it, and we've got ter be on a level. Hyer goes ther curse ov Californy!"

Crooked Tom made an effort to frustrate his companion's design; he leaped from the saddle with the agility of a monkey, and his little bronzed hand darted at Eldorado's wrist, but too late.

All at once the gold-hater threw the nugget from him with all his might, and it alighted far from the spot and beyond the dwarf's line of vision.

A shadow of rage darkened the boy's face as he settled back into the saddle, and looked up at Eldorado through his midnight lashes.

His hands shut like vises upon the skin of his burro, and for a moment he seemed about to fly at the mountain tramp's throat.

Eldorado Eph pretended not to notice the dwarf's ire, but he saw it all, and a faint smile appeared at the corners of his mouth and remained there for several seconds.

"We'll move along now," he said, addressing the boy. "Plundered Placer won't see us tonight. We'll hang up somewhar among the everlasting hills."

The last information seemed to please the dwarf; the cloud instantly left his face and in its place appeared a look of satisfaction, as he threw a quick glance toward the spot where the nugget had disappeared.

The next moment Eldorado Eph and his singular pard were again traversing the trail which led through a part of the celebrated gold region of the Sierra Nevada range.

By this time night had swooped down upon the pair, but a full moon hung in the star-set field of azure, and revealed minute objects with a distinctness that was wonderful.

The gold-hater rode ahead and apparently forgot the boy until he drew rein several miles from the spot where he threw away the nugget.

"Hyer's whar we'll hang up for the night, Crooked Tom," he said, turning half-way round in his saddle. "It's an old camp ter me an'—Jehosaphat! thunder bolt tear me, ef ther shrimp ain't missin'!"

Eldorado Eph looked like a person thunderstruck.

The dwarf was, indeed, missing, and the old tramp could not hear a sound of horse's hoofs though he listened intently.

"Gone back arter that piece ov yaller rock," he said to himself.

"He'd ride inter perdition fer an ounce ov ther curse ov Californy. For a copper, I'd let 'im go, but I darsn't do that. I'm tied ter that specimen ov crookedness by ties which death alone kin break. I'm goin' back, an' by the eternal stars! ef I find that nugget in his possession, I'll make him swaller it!"

In no good humor Eldorado Eph turned his horse's head, and began to retrace his steps.

He spurred the beast into a smart gallop, and awoke the sleeping echoes of the mountains as he rode down their flinty trails.

He had covered two miles when his horse suddenly reared, and, staggering back on his haunches, almost unseated him.

"Jehu! what's up, Satellite?" exclaimed the rider. "Thar warn't anything hyer an hour ago, but thar's suthin' on deck now, an' no mistake."

The horse was not calmed the least by Eph's voice, but continued to show symptoms of terror, and just then the Californian saw the apparition that had caused the fright.

In an instant out flashed Eph's revolver and the lock clicked as he leaned forward with mad eyes.

"Hands up thar, er kiss the trail!" he said in stern tones. "I'm not ter be fooled with if I am the most poverty-stricken cuss in these diggin's. Elevate yer shootin' members, my gentle gazelle. I've got ther dead drop on yer anatomy, an' men who know me would whisper in yer ear that I'm no boy with ther droppers!"

There was no response, and mystified as well as maddened by the silence, Eldorado Eph struck his horse so savagely with the spurs that he plunged forward despite his fright.

"Great Caesar's ghost! A mountain victim!" cried the gold-hater, shrinking from the object against which he had bumped in no pleasant manner. "Who's been byer since I passed by? That's what I'd like ter know."

By this time the apparition which had frightened his horse and for a moment unnerved him, had resolved itself into the body of a human being which swung from the end of a rope suspended from a moonlit crag which jutted from the rocky wall of the trail some thirty feet above Eph's head.

An hour had not elapsed since the mountain tramp passed that very spot!

Then the way was clear, no swinging body, no victim of mountain vengeance in the trail.

"Who is he, anyhow?" suddenly cried Eph, and seizing the man firmly with one hand he stood up in his stirrups and severed the cord, which was a lariat.

A startling gasp came from the hanged man's throat as he dropped into the old man's arms, but Eph clung to him and turned his face into the moonlight.

In answer to his question of "who is he, anyhow?" Eldorado Eph saw a short but well-built figure, a dark face, partially covered with a grizzled beard, and a pair of steel-gray eyes.

"By Jehu! he isn't dead!" fell in startling accents from the rescuer's lips. "I'm glad the boy's desertion fetched me back over the trail. I'll balk somebody's deviltry by savin' this galoot, ef he doesn't deserve it."

Eldorado slipped to the ground and began to restore the man to consciousness.

"I don't know 'im, but what ov thet?" said Eph to himself. "He's human, an' thet's enough. Mebbe he's a rattler what'll bite me one ov these days, but I'll take the risk."

In the little patch of moonshine that revealed this strange scene the tramp of the Nevadas worked zealously on the man, but with only faint prospects of success.

He had evidently reached the spot a minute too late; the hanged man had passed beyond the point of restoration.

"Let me git a word out ov 'im, and I'll quit satisfied," said Eph, grasping at straws. "Let him tell me who did this, an' what it war done for—"

Eldorado Eph paused abruptly, and the next moment he was holding one ear against the man's lips.

"Who did it an' why?" he asked eagerly. "Tell me. I'm Eldorado Eph, an' mebbe I'll avenge you."

The answer did not proceed from the victim's throat, but it came from a rifle seemingly not fifty yards away, and the head that the gold-hater supported fell from his hands!

"Jehu!" cried Eldorado Eph, springing to his feet and whipping out a revolver whose lock clicked as it leaped into the moonlight. "Whar's the miserable skunk what did thet? Meaner than a Pawnee thief is the man who would shoot a half-choked human!"

The eyes of Eph seemed balls of fire as they searched for the slayer of the half-hanged stranger.

"Show yerself!" he went on. "I'm alone, an' I'm Eldorado Eph, the poorest sinner ov Poverty Gulch. Choose yer weapons an' toe the mark! I'm as mad as a bull hornets' nest. Walk up an' tackle yer superior. The dead man warn't my pard, but I kin whip the man what shot him!"

For a moment there was no reply, and the challenge died away among the crags.

But, all at once, something like a bat came through the air and dropped at Eldorado's feet where it unrolled like a map.

"Tbet man carried a mystery," said a voice. "I'll give you the benefit ov it, Eldorado. Don't follow me an' don't seek to know who I am. My mission is to kill an' you are not on the list. Don't try to put your name thar!"

The voice ceased and Eldorado Eph knew that the speaker had moved away.

For a few moments he stood there nonplussed, and filled with strange feelings which cannot be described.

At his feet lay the object which had been cast at them, and near by he saw the bullet-bored face of the dead stranger.

"This scoops my racket!" ejaculated the gold-

hater, suddenly stooping and picking up the little roll at his feet. "I'm not great on mysteries, but I'll look inter this one, anyhow."

A moment's investigation showed him that he had become possessed of a dirty piece of pliable buckskin upon which was traceable a diagram which, to the mountaineer, was as undecipherable as an Egyptian inscription.

"It's a mystery, sure enough, an' a staggerin' one at that," he said. "If I thought it referred to some lost gold mine. I'd cut it ter pieces right hyer, but I'll save it fer the dwarf when I find 'im. What his eyes an' brain can't study out ain't worth lookin' arter. Yes, I'll save it for Crooked Tom, an' tharfore I'll not choke 'im for goin' back for the nugget."

Eldorado Eph proceeded to hide the buckskin under his dark shirt, and then stepped toward the man in the trail.

A glance told him that the bullet of the unknown had done its work, and he turned away as a footstep fell upon his ears.

"Hyer you ar', you runaway!" he exclaimed, confronting Crooked Tom who had just come up. "Don't stare yer peepers out at that galoot thar. He's dead enough. Hyer's something more important than him," and the piece of buckskin seemed to leap from Eldorado's bosom into the dwarf's hands.

A wild cry burst from the hunchback as the diagram touched his hands, and the next instant he leaped up and down, yelling like a demon:

"Gold! gold!" he fairly screamed.

"Gold! do you say?" flashed Eldorado, and tearing the buckskin from the dwarf's clutches he began to cut it up!

CHAPTER II.

"HANDS UP OR DIE!"

THE mad destruction of the mysterious diagram seemed to appall the hunchback, for his hilarity suddenly ceased, and he gazed at Eldorado Eph with blanched cheeks.

Not until his bowie had cut the buckskin into long strips did the infuriated man stop, and then he flung the fragments at Crooked Tom's feet.

"If it's a gold mystery, we don't want anything ter do with it," he said. "You an' me ar' ter remain as poor as Lazarus; understand that, pard. Did you find that lump ov gold I tossed away?"

The dwarf mournfully shook his head.

"No head answers," cried Eldorado, sternly. "Speak!"

"I didn't find it," declared the boy, contemplating the slit buckskin lying on the ground.

"You went back after it?"

"Yes."

"An' looked everywhar for it?"

"I did, master."

"An' failed ter find it? Thet's good. We'll go on now."

"And leave the dead man there?" asked the dwarf.

"Why not? He's nothin' ter us. I got hyer too late ter save him, but I war makin' him talk when some villain put an end ter it all with a bullet. I don't know him, an' I don't want ter, since his mystery pertained ter gold. Come, boy."

Crooked Tom did not seem to hear Eldorado, for he had advanced toward the dead man, and was staring down at the upturned face with almost startling interest.

"Did you ever see him afore?" suddenly asked the gold-hater, as a stride carried him to the hunchback's side and his bronzed hand encircled his arm.

"I—I think not."

"Then why do you look at him so?"

The hunchback was speechless, and Eph's eyes flashed madly again.

"We can't fool hyer, I tell you," he said. "It'll be mornin' afore we stretch out our limbs. It's gold—gold! with you, but you've got ter get it out ov yer head. I'm Eldorado Eph, King of Poverty Gulch, an' ye'r the prince royal. Come with me, prince!" and the hunchback was lifted bodily from the ground and placed on the back of his burro, which was renewing friendship with Eldorado's steed.

Reluctant still to leave the spot, Crooked Tom cast a lingering look behind as the horses moved off, and presently the dead man was the only occupant of the mountain trail in that quarter.

An hour passed, but nothing occurred to dissipate the tableau of the dead.

The fatal noose, loosened, of course, still encircled the victim's neck, and his blood had hardened on his set features.

In the middle of the second hour something came creeping, without noise, down the trail.

It had the movements of the leopard, but the figure was that of a human being, and as it crossed a strip of lingering moonlight near the corpse the dwarf stood revealed!

Crooked Tom had come back; he bad, in all probability, eluded Eldorado Eph again, and curiosity and passion had brought him back to the interesting spot.

All at once he pounced upon the cut buckskin and transferred it to his bosom, then he went up to the stiffened figure in the trail and laid hold of one of the heavy boots.

Crooked Tom was possessed of long arms in which lay prodigious strength.

When he stood erect, his hands reached a point below his knees, so that, without stooping, he could have attempted to lift himself by the straps of his boots.

Those who knew the mountain pards often wondered how they came to unite their fortunes.

Eldorado Eph had several times volunteered the information that he had come to the rich placers of the Sierra Nevada for something beside gold, and the manner in which he despised it, confirmed the statement.

While he never carried a particle of the precious ore on his person, and cursed it whenever opportunity presented itself, Crooked Tom, on the other hand, loved it with all his heart.

Waking or sleeping, the mind of the hunchback seemed always on gold; he was Eldorado's opposite, always threading the mountain trails in search of rich placers, and frequently incurring his companion's curses and ill-will.

There were not wanting men who said that Eldorado Eph was trailing a mystery, that he was ferreting out the perpetrators of a mountain tragedy which had taken place years before the date of our romance, that Crooked Tom's love for gold was all put on as a part of the programme, and that Eldorado's hatred of the yellow ore was only "skin deep."

They knew Eldorado Eph in every gold camp of the Nevada range. boastful of his poverty, he never neglected an opportunity to win gold over the gambling-tables of the California camps, but, what he did win, he would throw away with a curse as if the metal burned his hands.

His figure was imposing, but showed, to some extent his eccentricities, and he kept them alive in his dress.

The light sombrero he wore had a crimson band, to which were attached two red tassels which constantly dangled about his left ear.

He wore a buckskin jacket over a dark blue shirt always open at the throat, rather close-fitting trowsers and high-topped boots.

There was a keen, dark and restless eye in his head; his upper lip was hidden by a fine black mustache, and, when erect, Eldorado Eph cut a striking figure.

Never still for a moment, as if some unseen fate urged him constantly on, and almost always accompanied by the hunchback, he flitted from camp to camp, from trail to trail, at all times ready to deliver a sermon against gold, but never failing to see every occupant of the camp before he left it.

If he had a secret, if his ceaseless tramps made up a mystery or a man-hunt, Crooked Tom knew nothing of it, and the two pards kept together, the one hating gold with an intensity that bordered on foolishness, the other ready to fall down and become its slave.

Let us go back to the hunchback in the pass with the victim of bullet and cord.

Crooked Tom had returned to the spot with a well defined purpose. Having made sure of the cut up diagram which, as we have seen, he hid in his bosom, he began to remove one of the dead man's boots.

This was no easy task for the foot gave him no assistance, but the deformed brought all his strength to the task and by bracing himself, he accomplished his purpose and suddenly fell back with the prize in his hands.

He was somewhat surprised and disgusted to discover that the foot revealed was stockingless, but he dove his hands into the recesses of the heavy boot and searched them well.

Nothing rewarded the quest, and he suddenly threw the boot away to attack the other foot.

Three minutes later Crooked Tom threw the second boot away with an exclamation of disappointment.

"Nothing but the cut up buckskin!" he cried. "Eldorado's knife has made a havoc with it, and I am to lose the buried gold, after all. This is the man I have dreamed about, the man I have hunted ever since I came to these mountains, and now I find him dead and his gold-map cut to pieces. It is too bad! The gold-city will be lost forever if I can't decipher the diagram. I hate you, Eldorado, for this!" The dwarf clinched his hands. "I wouldn't make a handsome bonanza king, I know; but I'm going to be one, all the same! I had the whole mystery in my hands awhile ago, but what does it look like now?" and Crooked Tom drew forth the diagram and held it up in the moonlight.

It was literally slit into ribbons, and the moonshine streamed through it.

The hunchback grited his teeth while he gazed, but all at once he seated himself on a flat rock near by and attempted to close the slits with his hands, and to arrange the buckskin in a manner that would show him the lines of the diagram.

It was a Herculean task for the dwarf, but at the end of half an hour he had succeeded, and his eager eyes could clearly trace the marks before him.

After all, he saw but a maze of traceries, a jumble of dots, crosses and tortuous lines—enough to bewilder the most penetrating.

"It's the solution of the mystery, the diagram

of the lost gold city!" exclaimed Crooked Tom. "I'm not going to give it up till I have mastered it. By the eternal stars! as Eldorado says, it shall all be mine!"

"You'd make a fine bonanza king, you would, hunchbacked, ape-armed and ugly as Satan, ha, ha!" came to his hearing. Crooked Tom sprung up as if a rattlesnake had rattled under the stone.

Instantly the diagram was thrust back into his bosom, and he showed resistance by standing as erect as his deformity would permit and clinching his hands.

"Who calls me Satan?" he demanded.

"I do!" and there rode forward from the shadows a few feet away a man from whom the dwarf instinctively recoiled. "I'm the galoot what called you a small edition ov the devil," was the continuance. "Mebbe you've heard ov me?"

"California Claude!" ejaculated the deformed.

The man on horseback showed his teeth in a smile of acknowledgment, and then leaning forward pointed at the dwarf's breast.

"I'll take what you hid thar," he went on in provoking sternness.

Crooked Tom recoiled a step with a gasp of despair.

"You don't mean my heart, do you?" he said.

"No, but the document next to it," was the answer.

"Pon my honor, Captain Claude I've nothing hid under my shirt. I never carry—"

"Pshaw!" interrupted the man who was strikingly handsome in silver-fringed jacket, tasseled boots, gray sombrero, and armed to the teeth. "I have a way of my own, Mr. Hunchback. Toss the document this way, or I'll take it at the end ov this."

With the utmost ease California Claude drew and thrust forward a revolver which covered the dwarf in an instant.

"Give it to me alive, or I'll take it from you dead! Take your choice!"

The surrender of the buckskin diagram seemed to take a large slice of Crooked Tom's heart.

He gave it up with a reluctance that amused the horseman, and never took his eyes from it until it disappeared beneath Claude's jacket.

"It's only gone for a time," he vowed to himself. "I'll raze these everlasting hills but what I'll have it again! I'll prove to him that I am a small edition of the devi. Dwarfs sometimes are more dangerous than giants. Never mind, California Claude, we all know you; but, if I mistake not, your career is mighty nigh its close!"

The man on horseback seemed to know what was passing through the dwarf's mind, for he gave a loud laugh of derision, and while Crooked Tom's eyes glittered green like a serpent's, he touched his horse with a spur and galloped off, leaving the incensed dwarf robbed and alone on the trail.

"What have I got, anyhow?" he asked himself when he drew rein, several miles from the scene of the robbery. "Ho! ho! a piece of buckskin cut to pieces with a knife. Hello! By my lady's eyes! it's a diagram, an' a valuable one, too, else that gold-lovin' dwarf wouldn't have been studyin' it."

He spread it out before him as best he could, and then bunched four matches and struck them against a rock.

When the little torch was blazing its best, he held it over the diagram and began to examine the strange traceries which were so suggestive of a mystery.

The light revealed his swarthy but handsome face and elegant figure, and made of him a splendid target for a prowling foe.

"The writin' is Spanish," he said aloud. "The chart is old as the hills. Great heavens! It is the clew to the lost city of gold—a diagram of the mine in which Don Diavolo was walled up with millions. It is not a legend! Not I have found the trail to the lost city, an' I will find the Don an' his wealth! What a stroke ov fortune! California Claude, you're in luck. Hurrah for the golden paradise!"

His last sentence ended with a cheer, and his laced hat went spinning toward the stars.

The next moment, however, his hilarity received a sudden check, for a startling command rung out on the mountain air:

"Hands up or die, curse of the California placers!"

California Claude started in his saddle, his hat alighted on the ground, and he saw at once the person who had uttered the command.

He saw, too, the rifle that covered him, and behind it the willowy figure and sparkling eyes of a beautiful young girl.

"Queen Bess!" he ejaculated.

CHAPTER III.

THE QUEEN OF STEELTRAP.

"FAIRLY faced at last!" came over the leveled weapon, which was an ornamented Winchester, and steadily held by the person called Queen Bess by the pest of the placers. "I want the blood of no man, California Claude, but I do want peace among the mountain-

camps; I do want the gold-seekers to sleep secure after they have wrested the nuggets from the hills, and I want you to swear to ride to the coast and never return, to rob and to say 'Hands up' to the gold-hunters of the yellow hills."

California Claude heard the girl through without once interrupting her.

Her tones were full of melody, but there was a certain sternness in her voice which told him that she was not to be trifled with, much less brow-beaten with braggadocio.

Before he answered her he dexterously slipped the buckskin chart out of sight, for he was determined to retain his discovery at all hazards, and he fancied that the girl's eyes had not noticed the movement.

"Hands up it is when beauty demands it," he laughed, as up went his hands. "Now, Queen Bess, what is it I am to do?"

The girl seemed taken aback by his coolness and prompt action, and it was several seconds before she replied:

"You are prompt," she said. "I like promptness. For months you have terrorized the gold-placers of the Sierras. The gold-hunters know not when nor where to look for you. You have robbed, plundered and lassoed until you must be a millionaire, and have a hundred human lives on your death-list. Men call you Claude the Pitiless; but you call yourself California Claude."

"An' I ought to know my name, eh, Queen?" he laughed.

"Certainly, but the name men have given you fits you best," was the answer.

"Do you really think so?"

"I do."

"Thanks!" and the pest of the placers bowed.

"I want peace in this country, as I have already said," the girl went on. "But, while you remain in it, it can know none. Now, California Claude, you must take an oath in the presence of Heaven that you will give the placers rest, that from this night they shall not be cursed with your presence, and that you will turn your face toward the coast."

"Anything else?" quietly asked Claude.

The girl bit her lip till it crimsoned.

"I am to swear all this, or drop from Montezuma's back a corpse, I suppose!" he continued.

"I shall shoot for peace and look to Heaven for forgiveness!" declared Queen Bess firmly, with a glance toward the stars. "You have baffled twenty bands of Regulators and as many sworn private hunters. You have rendered the mountain passes unsafe, the camps perilous places; your lasso has looped the best men in the Sierras; and, if you have not been grossly misrepresented, you have not spared the young and beautiful of my sex."

"That is false!" thundered California Claude. "Stand me face to face with the man who says that my lasso has ever fallen over the head of woman! Show me the combined camp, I care not what its numbers are, that flings this lie at me. Spare me for an hour, Queen Bess, and guide me to my insulters. I am California Claude, I may be Claude the Pitiless; but there never lived the woman lassoed by my hand!"

"Very well," said the girl, smiling. "But the oath? Is it to be taken?"

"The oath to leave the placers for the coast?"

"Yes."

"And never to return?"

"Never to come back!"

There was no compromise in the girl's tones.

California Claude looked over the rifle into her eyes and saw quiet, but firm, resolution there.

"What's a forced oath worth?" he said, under his breath. "Queen Bess has the drop on me, an' I've got to get out of it the best way I can. I hold the clew to Don Diavolo's millions an' they're worth lyin' for. I'll take any oath to beat the sorceress of the placer camps. She may triumph for a while, but in the end I'll be thar!"

Having decided thus, California Claude hissed in no good humor at the girl.

"Administer the oath! You've got me foul, Queen Bess, an' I must knuckle. Let the placers thank you, but keep off my new huntin'-grounds; there your beauty will be no shield, my California tigress."

His counterfeited rage completely deceived the placer queen, and made her hesitate, but only for a moment.

"Swear, then!" she cried. "Swear to leave the Sierras, to infest the gold-camps no more forever;—swear that you will leave them tonight—now! Swear!"

"I swear!" echoed the desperado, and without permission his hands fell again at his sides.

Queen Bess did not lower her rifle, but kept it at her shoulder as if she suspected treachery, notwithstanding the oath.

But California Claude disarmed her by his first act.

He grasped the rein instead of a revolver, and gave her a parting salute with his right hand.

"It's ho! for the gold-coast, my daisy queen!" he called out as he galloped away, his black locks flying loose under his laced hat, and the

girl, with eyes flashing with pride, sat still and saw him disappear where the shadows of the mountain crags lay thick.

"I've removed the curse from the gold-camps!" she exclaimed, in tones of satisfaction. "The miners can sleep soundly now, and they can ride the trails without fear of that terrible black lasso. Go to the gold-coast, California Claude. I hope you will find your match there. Come back to the placers, or break your oath by remaining here, and your life will not be worth an ounce of dust if I find you out. What will Frank say when I tell him that I, a girl, the waif of Thunderbolt Camp, have redeemed the gold-grounds of the Sierras?"

In the silence that followed her unanswered question, Queen Bess turned her horse's head and rode away at a speed which told how anxious she was to reach a certain place.

She seemed to have forgotten California Claude in her pleasure at having driven him from the country he had cursed so long, and her eyes fairly sparkled with triumph and delight as her steed covered the ground of the nocturnal trail.

What had become of California Claude?

Galloping through the mountains no longer, but seated on a flat rock with a torch blazing over his head, and intently studying a piece of buckskin which had been badly cut by a keen blade, sat the curse of the placers.

He was at work on the mysterious diagram which had changed hands several times since sundown, and which, if he did not guard it closely, might have another owner before dawn.

The burning torch threw his shadow against a rock at his back, and showed him the winding lines of the diagram whose gaps he had closed for the present.

One by one his swarthy fingers traced them out, only to find that all ended at a common center.

"It is there—the golden tomb!" exclaimed Claude. "That center is Don Diavolo's tomb. He has been there for centuries among millions, an' his Injun bride with him, they say. What! go to the coast an' leave all this behind? Respect an oath administered at the rifle's muzzle? Not much! My pretty tigress, you don't know California Claude, an' you, spawn ov the placers—you haven't seen the last ov Claude, the Pitiless!"

He sprung up while the echoes of the rocks were awakened by his voice, and towered a handsome giant in the light of his torch.

"Hear me, Heaven, if you have ears!" he went on, holding the mutilated chart above his head. "I am goin' to solve the mystery I hold in my hand. It shall unlock the buried bonanza to Claude Cothard. I fling in your face the oath I have taken! The placers have not lost their pest, but they may miss him for a time. Be on your guard, Queen Bess. I will not forget you. There may come a time when you will be queen over the buried city of gold. An' I will be its king!"

And California Claude threw the torch to the ground as he walked to the horse which had waited quietly for him a few feet from the spot.

He seated himself in the saddle without touching the stirrups and rode off.

"I suppose Bess is tellin' the galoots ov Steeltrap City how she rid the placers ov Claude, the Pitiless!" he laughed. "They'll give her a vote ov thanks, an' curse her afore the month ends. Hello! somebody's ridin' this way." And California Claude's hand began to uncoil the lasso that hung at his saddle-bow. "Mebbe I kin send a citizen ov Steeltrap home with my compliments."

He guided his horse into a cleft in the mountain wall, which offered itself at that place, and waited for his victim.

The sound of horse's hoofs grew more distinct as the seconds waned, and all at once a single rider burst into view and galloped past the ambush.

"The very child I want!" parted Claude's lips in low tones, and the black noose of the never-failing lasso went on its dread mission.

The next second there rung out a wild cry, and the person who attempted to throw off the accursed coil of the strangling cord fell from his horse and lay at the desperado's mercy.

In the "public square" of Steeltrap City sat Queen Bess in her saddle, surrounded by the entire population of the place.

"An' so you've rid the placers ov California Claude!" exclaimed a man, whose sombrero had a crimson band.

"I have bound him with an oath," answered the girl, as her eyes glittered with victory. "I didn't shed a drop of his blood, though I'm willing to admit that his crimes have forfeited it a thousand times. He is riding toward the gold-coast now."

"What do you think ov that, Eldorado?" called out a mining giant to the man with the ornamented hat. "This daisy girl has succeeded whar all the camps hev failed. Off with yer hats, men! Three cheers an' a Californy tiger for Queen Bess ov Steeltrap City!"

Off went every hat, more than a hundred in all, and the first wild shout had broken the slumbers of the night when a horse galloped

across the square, and twenty hands went up, and twenty voices exclaimed:

"My God, look yonder! Heavens! it is Fearless Frank!"

Queen Bess had already turned and caught sight of the horse and his rider, but her gaze was riveted more particularly on the latter.

"Thet's keepin' an oath with a vengeance!" muttered Eldorado Eph, the King of Poverty Gulch. "That's what I call—"

His sentence was broken by loud oaths and a rush toward the new arrival.

But Queen Bess was the quickest of all.

Her horse carried her through the crowd with a bound, and as a startling cry parted her lips, she threw herself upon the rider who was strapped in the saddle.

"Frank—Frank! Oh, God! you are not dead!" she exclaimed.

The men drew back. They saw her lift the young man's head, and saw it drop from her hands upon his breast.

That was enough.

The Queen of Steeltrap City fell from the saddle in a swoon.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

FOR thirty minutes the denizens of Steeltrap held an excited session.

"Gold's at ther bottom ov ther hull thing," growled the man who stood at the edge of the mountain camp. "Ain't I glad I never let it run off with my brains? I'm ther monarch ov Poverty Gulch, an' nobody wants ter usurp my throne. Ef ther boy dies, the girl will go wild, an' California Claude will have a trailer at his heels that'll give him trouble. It's about time fer my crooked pard ter be sneakin' back. He left me ter hunt up that piece ov buckskin I cut all ter pieces. It means gold ter Crooked Tom; but I've spiled ther mystery with my bowie."

Eldorado Eph might have continued if his quick ears had not caught the sound of a footstep, and he turned to find himself confronted by the young Queen of Steeltrap.

Her hand was about to fall on his arm when he discovered her.

"Wal, how's the youngster?" asked the gold-hater before the girl could address him.

"Alive, thank Heaven!" was the response as the eyes that looked into Eldorado's face lighted up with hope. "I am glad I've found you alone. I've been looking for you."

"Wal?"

"I've made a singular discovery," she went on. "I know it wasn't intended that I should see what I did, but, now that I have seen it, I want you to share the knowledge I have accidentally obtained. It is strange that Frank never mentioned the matter to me, but he must have reasons for keeping it a secret."

"What are you drivin' at?" cried Eldorado, exhibiting much impatience.

"Frank carries the strangest tattooing on his breast I ever saw."

"What is it like?"

"I cannot describe it. I saw it but for a moment and drew bac' mystified and alarmed. I resolved to seek you, for you know something about everything—"

"Don't flatter the monarch ov Poverty Gulch, girl," interrupted the mountaineer with a smile. "I'm willin' ter take a squint at Frank's tattoo, an' ef I kin elucidate it, I'll do it."

"Follow me, then. He was asleep when I left him, and I drew the cover over him to hide the marks which I am sure the pards ov Steeltrap know nothing about. If he is awake, we cannot investigate, but we shall soon see."

The eager girl led Eldorado Eph back into the camp which dignity had miscalled a city, and did not stop until she reached the threshold of a small cabin near the center.

The rough door stood slightly ajar, and pushing it open Queen Bess looked in.

A soft light from a tallow-dip on a deal-table in one corner revealed the interior of the room, and the regular breathings of a deep sleeper fell upon the couple's ears.

"We've reached him in good time," whispered the girl to Eldorado. "He hasn't stirred since I left. Now for my discovery."

The twain glided toward the bed on tip-toe, the girl holding the candle in her hand, and the monarch of Poverty Gulch with curiosity visible in his eyes, at her side.

The occupant of the rough couch was sound asleep and lying on his back with his pale young face, strikingly handsome in its deathly pallor, upturned to the loft above.

Queen Bess glanced up into her companion's face, and her hand crept toward the cover that hid Fearless Frank's neck and bosom.

"Be keerful; don't wake 'im," whispered Eldorado.

The young girl's hand touched the coverlet, and it began to move.

Eldorado saw first the deep red marks of a lasso at the youth's throat, but, as the cover crept back under direction of the girl's hand, he saw more.

Suddenly Queen Bess turned and looked up into Eldorado's face.

Her eyes said plainly:

"There! What do you think of that?"

"Great Jerusalem!" he ejaculated. "He's marked with the same diagram I cut to pieces for my hunchback pard!"

Queen Bess dropped the coverlet and started back.

"What does it mean? Tell me!" she exclaimed. "He never intimated to me that he was thus strangely marked, and I discovered it by the merest accident. I stole into this place awhile ago to see how he was getting along. I turned down the sheet to see the marks of the lasso when lo! I saw this mysterious tattoo. Do you know what it means, Eldorado?"

"I do not, an' by heavens I don't want ter!" cried the gold-hater. "I b'lieve, though, that the man who wears it will be cursed through life."

"Why?"

"Because my pard said that the chart I cut up meant gold, an' it war just like the one tattooed over Frank's heart."

Queen Bess made no reply.

"I'm not pryin' inter mysteries whose end is gold," continued Eph. "I wouldn't own an ounce ov ther accursed metal for the world, an', by Jerusalem, I'll help nobody else to any."

"But what bad I best do? Shall I acquaint him with my discovery?"

"No. Keep it to yourself. He mightn't like you for it. Ther mystery may be cl'ared up some day. Let us wait. When he wakes up, he'll feel better, but his throat will be sore. Do you know that California Claude's lasso choked him?"

"I am sure of it."

"After he took your oath!"

"I do not know about that. Frank will be able to throw some light on the affair when he wakens."

Eldorado Eph made no reply, but stepped to the couch and gazed for several moments into the sleeper's face.

Queen Bess watched him eagerly, and did not restrain him when he sought to withdraw, but followed him quietly from the cabin.

"Ar' you goin' ter watch him?" asked Eldorado, turning suddenly upon the girl in the starlight.

"Does he need watching while he sleeps?"

"He does! Let no livin' man see that chart on his breast. His life depends on it bein' kept a secret."

"Do you think California Claude saw it?"

"I can't say, but I think not."

They were walking among the cabins that comprised Steeltrap City, the girl at Eldorado's side with anxious eyes riveted on his face.

"Don't let my pard see it," the gold-hater went on. "He's gold-mad, and he might cut it out to replace the chart he lost at my hands tonight."

The girl uttered an exclamation of horror.

"Yes, ther's danger ov him losing his tattoo," continued Eldorado. "Men will do anything for gold in this infernal kentry, an' ther tattoo means riches that can't be calculated. But, who put it on his breast? That's what puzzles me." And Eldorado's countenance showed plainly that he was "puzzled."

The Queen of Steeltrap City stopped suddenly at Eldorado's last word.

"Heavens! you blanch my cheek with fears!" she said. "I will go back this minute and watch him. No living man, not his friend, shall gaze upon the mysterious tracery on his breast."

"Don't let his best friends see it," warned Eldorado. "Every man in Steeltrap is gold-mad. A sight of that tattoo would turn their brains an' ther galoots would bev it ef they hed ter flay its owner."

With a cry which told her love for Fearless Frank, the Queen of Steeltrap started back.

"Go an' watch that mysterious scrawl," muttered Eldorado, pointing toward the cabin where the youth lay. "Thar will be lively times hyer afore long and that tattoo will be the cause ov'em. Ef men get ter know that he carries it over his heart, they'll fight like tigers for it. He thinks himself safe in Steeltrap, an' he is ez long as nobody knows about ther mystery."

"One question and then I go back to him," said the girl coming forward. "Did you know before to-night, Eldorado, that a chart of the kind was in existence?"

"I knew that one used to exist, but I never dreamed that it was carried on ther breast ov a livin' man."

"To what does it refer?"

"Tbar!" and the bronzed hand of the gold-hater pushed Queen Bess away. "You promised ter ask only one question, an' you've already shot another at me. Go back an' guard that bov!"

She saw that he was determined, for he turned away and she was left alone.

"I will guard the mark!" resolutely spoken. "Heaven grant that it may never prove a curse to him! Woe to the man or men who attempts to blot it out, or to deprive him of it!"

Queen Bess hastened toward the cabin occupied by Fearless Frank.

When she approached the cabin she beg'n to step on tip-toe, as if fearful of rousing the man

she had left in a quiet sleep a few moments before.

She reached the door left ajar and pushed it open.

What did she see? And why did she start back, with difficulty suppressing a shriek that bubbled to her lips?

Beside Fearless Frank's bed stood two men, their figures revealed by the candle which one was holding over the sleeper.

Queen Bess saw them at a glance, and noted their positions.

One was bending over the youth, in the act of sketching the mysterious tattoo on his breast which had been uncovered!

A thrill shot through the girl's frame, and Eldorado Eph's admonition rung in her ears:

"Let no livin' man see that tattooed chart!"

But she was too late!

Two giants in buckskin were ahead of her; they had discovered the strange diagram, and the pencil of one was already transferring it to paper!

She realized in a flash, while her blood seemed to turn to ice, the terrible importance of the weird tattoo.

"They sha'n't carry it off!" she suddenly exclaimed. "They shall not rob him of the secret he may have carried from his birth!"

She leaped across the threshold with the fury of a whelp-robb'd tigress.

In the flash of a second and before the swarthy roughs knew that she was near, she held the half finished sketch in one hand while the other thrust a cocked revolver into their faces.

The two men recoiled with blazing eyes and oaths of rage.

The girl who confronted them seemed to have dropped through the roof.

"Get out of here!" commanded the Queen of Steeltrap sternly.

"You have carried your work already too far. Were it not for waking him," and she glanced at Fearless Frank, "I'd send bullets through your heads. Refuse to obey me, and I'll do it anyhow!"

She crushed the sketch in her left hand, and never took her eyes from the pards of the plasters.

"Go! I count five for you!" Queen Bess went on. "You carry your lives in your hands. Choose ye life or death."

The pards stepped back, and the eyes of one flashed fiercely as he pointed toward the bed.

"He can't keep that map long," he hissed. "It's worth more than all the placers ov the Sierras. We ar' goin' ter hev it if we hev ter flay him for it! Thar's ten thousand men in Californy who'd risk their lives for them black lines an' dots over that young galoot's heart. I tried ter transfer 'em ter paper, but you've balked us, my she wildcat. The next time, mebbe we'll cut the map out with our bowies!"

A startling ejaculation parted the girl's lips.

"Try it!" she cried. "Remember that Queen Bess of Steeltrap City stands between the strange chart and the ten thousand Californians you have mentioned! The bands that attempt to reach him shall drop in death! I am ready to defend his secret with my life."

A derisive sneer appeared at the corners of the desperadoes' mouths, and the girl's revolver drove them sullenly to the door.

"We'll find 'im—not hyer, mebbe, but somewhar!" hissed one. "Thar's goin' ter be a fight fer that gold-map. Good-by, my mountain flower. We've struck the long-lost trail at last; we've struck the path ter millions, an' it's nigh the daisy's heart."

The next moment Queen Bess was the only companion the youth had, and as the footsteps of the roughs died away her brain whirled, but she kept her feet.

"Heaven support me! No delirium now!" she cried. "I stand between my love and death!"

She walked to the bed strengthened by some inward resolution, and bent over the sleeper thereon.

All at once her powers seemed to give way, and she sunk upon his bosom.

How long she remained in the swoon she did not know, but when she opened her eyes, she saw an apish figure looking down upon the tattoo work, while a hand held back the cover.

For a moment Queen Bess thought the apparition a creature of her imagination, but an exclamation aroused her.

"You here, too!" she cried, and springing at the visitor's throat, she dragged him from his perch, and with almost superhuman strength thrust him from the cabin!

As he struck the ground in the starlight a fiendish chatter broke from his throat.

It was Crooked Tom, the dwarf!

CHAPTER V.

THE BAND OF FOURTEEN.

"WAL, what results?"

This question greeted two men who, in the first flushings of dawn, joined a dozen stalwart roughs who had waited for them in a deep pass among the mountains.

"Durned little," was the growling reply from the foremost of the twain. "We got thar, an' found the young coker, an' hed things our own way for a spell. He war in a fix ter suit us ter a 't, for somebody hed looped 'im, an' he war

alone in a shanty, an' so fast asleep that thunder wouldn't hav waked 'im. Bluffer, thar, held the light an' I pulled down the kiver. Sure enough, thar war a map on his skin right over his heart, an' every line an' dot war plain. We hed it our own way, ez I hev remarked, up ter this moment. I began ter draw ther chart off keerfully, not missin' the smallest part ov it, an' war gittin' along swimmin'ly, when a she wild-cat dashed in on us!"

The rough listeners uttered exclamations of astonishment.

"A wild-cat in Steeltrap, Keno!" cried several.

"That's what I call her, at any rate," said Keno Kit. "In Steeltrap her handle is Queen Bess."

"Oho! the gal," said half a dozen voices.

"Yes. Wal, in she came like a thunderbolt, an' jest when I war gittin' my work in on ther most pertick'lar part ov ther diagram, Jerusalem! ther paper disappeared in a flash, an' when Bluffer an' me looked at her she hed both ov us kivered with a revolver, an' thar war shoot behind ther trigger. She's a coker, pards, an' when we fool with her we fool with powder."

"An' you left her in possession ov the field?"

"Had ter," grinned Keno. "I told 'er, though, that we war goin' ter hev that map, ef we hed ter cut it out with our bowies, an' I gently remarked also that thar war ten thousand galoots in Californy that 'd give their very hearts' blood for it."

"How did she take that information?"

"It made her eyes snap, an' she dared the hell ten thousand ov us—jest what I thought she'd do."

There was silence for the space of a minute after Keno Kit had concluded.

"We've made one move and a girl has baffled us," said a man whose distinguishing feature was a whitish scar above his left eye. "If it's ther keep on in this way, we may as well give up the scheme."

"Give it up? Never!" vociferated the listeners. "I don't blame Bluffer and Keno. They did the best they could under the circumstances. They warn't lookin' fer a gal ter take a hand in ther game—"

"Not the kind ov hand she took," said Keno. "Send me down ter Steeltrap another time, an' I'll make ther infernal place queenless!"

There was fire in the speaker's voice and eyes.

"Send me ter Steeltrap arter that diagram an' I'll not come back without it," he went on. "I didn't more'n half b'lieve that it war ter be found over a beatin' heart, but I know it now. It's a blamed strange way of preservin' a secret; ther man is liable ter die away from any human bein', an' the secret would be entirely lost. In five minutes more I would hev hed ther copy, an' Fearless Frank, ez they call him in Steeltrap, wouldn't hav been any the wiser. But the black-eyed wild-cat clawed it from me, an' drove me away with her six-shooter. It sha'n't happen ag'in. Such a thing can't happen twice!"

"We know the lay-out now," said the leader of the fourteen. "Fearless Frank carries ther key ter millions tattooed on his breast, an' his best friend is a girl who thinks ther world ov 'im, I suspect."

"Thar isn't a drop ov blood in her veins she wouldn't shed for him," said Keno Kit.

The captain of the desperadoes laughed.

"We'll give her a chance, mebbe," he said. "Boys, you know ther importance ov possessin' that map. It's ther gateway ter piles ov gold—gold already washed. It's ther key ter a secret that's been kept for a hundred years, an' I'll bet my teeth that Fearless Frank doesn't know its importance."

"Ov course he doesn't, else he would hev told the gal," put in Keno Kit. "She war taken by surprise when I told her that ten thousand men among ther Sierras war ready ter lay down their lives for the map. Ov course he doesn't know what it's worth. If he did he wouldn't be Fearless Frank, ov Steel-trap City, to-night."

"I feel like throwin' my hat toward the stars," cried the captain of the crowd. "We know whar ter lay our hands on ther only diagram ov ther lost gold city. Hurrah!" and his shout made the mountain ring.

"Didn't all yer fuss in the cabin waken the youngster?" asked one of the group of Keno Kit.

"No."

"Mebbe he war dead."

"Not much. He war breathin' when I war drawin' ther chart, an' ther gal knew him ter be alive when she played her cold deck on us. Ef I hed found him dead, I wouldn't hav stopped ter copy ther diagram, but I'd fetched away ther original."

"Never mind; we'll get it yet, Keno."

"Jerusalem! what a divvy thar'll be," laughed Keno Kit. "A million a piece, an' Don Diavolo's bones thrown in!"

The mountain desperadoes laughed until their captain's uplifted hand proclaimed silence.

"To-night," he said, "we play a bolder game than Bluffer an' Keno tried last night. To-night we strike for the biggest bonanza on the face ov the globe. This time we'll not be satis-

fied with a copy ov that chart. An important line might he overlooked in the copy. We'll get at the bot'om ov the mystery from the original map. Ef fourteen men-tigers from Mendocino County can't eucbre a boy an' a gal, may they die at the revolver's muzzle!"

"That's bizness, cap'n! Three cheers for the lost bonanza."

Eleven hats went off but the captain's voice checked the enthusiasm on the eve of a wild outburst.

"Save yer cheers till we've unlocked the big mine. You'll need yer voices then," he said. "To-night we make a descent on Steeltrap City."

"If we fail this time—"

"Fail? Who thinks ov failing?" roared the leader, his eyes flashing like heated irons. "Fail when thar's fourteen ter two, an' one ov them a half-choked boy?"

The man who had suggested failure seemed to sink into his boots.

"Don't you see! we've got the call 'on the game'" the captain went on.

"Even the pards ov Steeltrap don't dream that Fearless Frank carries the leg ter millions pricked inter his skin. We must get that map afore they suspect it, an' we must strike to-night. It used ter be said that long ago a drawin' ov the mine at its surroundings existed on a piece ov buckskin, but, if it did, it war lost years ago. It exists only on the young Steeltrap fate's skin. Beyond the boy an' his gal pard, we are the only sharers ov its existence. Arter to-night, we'll hold ther lost gold city in an iron grip."

The mountain toughs with one accord and apparently in one voice echoed:

"To-night!"

The group in the wild pass of the Sierras made up a tableau exciting in its aspects.

They were just the kind of men likely to win in an enterprise of the kind they had undertaken.

Tradition tells of long-lost mines of gold and silver in the mountains of New Mexico and Sonora, mines of fabulous wealth, which have been shut up for centuries, or ever since their old Spanish masters left them, and bore with them into the unseen lands from which no mortal ever returns the secret of their location.

History abounds with glimpses of futile searches after many of these buried mines and romance has invested them with thrilling interest.

But somewhere among the Sierras was a city of gold whose people had perished from the face of the earth more than a century prior to the date of our romance, which, let us say, reader, might be found among the years of the last decade.

Men had believed a thousand wild weird tales about it, had tramped the mountain trails in vain, and in fruitless search shed their blood and worn out their lives for—nothing!

Thousands of supposed clews had been followed up in vain, and rumors of the discovery of the mine had time and again filled California with the wildest excitement.

Men supposed to know something about the secret had been followed, shadowed night and day from pass to pass and from camp to camp, and finally killed on their refusal to locate the lost bonanza when they knew nothing at all about it.

If the records of the hunts for the buried city of gold could be obtained, they would eclipse in thrilling interest the wildest published narratives of romance and adventure.

But now a singular diagram had been discovered pricked into the skin of a young man who had just begun his twenty-first year.

Why should it not be the clew to the gigantic bonanza, left long ago by men whose very names were forgotten?

The fourteen oath-bound gold-hunters of the Sierras did not stop to think that it might have no bearing on their quest.

An old Indian hag, picked up and tortured, had told them that the map of the gold region would be found over the heart of a boy in a mining-camp among the Sierras.

From camp to camp they went, only to leave them disappointed, but not hopeless.

At last the eyes of Keno Kit, the spy of the fourteen, found Fearless Frank in Steeltrap City.

"That's the galoot," he said to himself. "Ten chances to one that we've struck the trail at last."

They did not think that even with the map or its counterpart in their possession, the mystery might still remain unsolved.

They knew the trails of the Sierras so well that some portion of the chart would appear familiar.

Give them the diagram, and they would answer for the rest!

Elated by Keno Kit's discovery of the tattoo on Fearless Frank's breast, they planned a descent on Steeltrap City as soon as darkness should again spread her wings.

There should be no failure this time.

Queen Bess' resolution to stand between Fearless Frank and the ten thousand Californians ready to shed their blood for the tattoo marks,

drew forth a laugh of derision from Captain Leopard and his pards when Keno Kit referred to it.

They saw the sun creep up, soar to the zenith and drop once more toward the west.

They watched the shades of night envelop the crags that hemmed in their rendezvous, and then at Captain Leopard's voice they sprung to saddle.

"Swear!" cried the chief of the fourteen as he stood up in his stirrups and threw up his hand. "Swear neither ter balt nor ter turn back until we've found Don Diavolo and his Injun bride!"

Thirteen right hands were lifted toward the stars and the loud words "we swear!" filled the pass.

Then Captain Leopard uttered a loud shout and spurred his coal-black steed toward Steeltrap City followed by his thirteen desperadoes.

They did not look back, therefore they saw not the statue-like person whose lips were wreathed with a smile of derision.

"Go to Steeltrap!" this person said. "An' may you all die in its jaws!"

A moment later the wild men of the Sierras had disappeared, and the person who had overheard their oath and their last deliberations, turned his horse's head in an opposite direction.

"So, the plan of Don Diavolo's city is pricked into the boy's breast, eh?" he said. "Why didn't I know that last night? But never mind, Captain Leopard. I'm willin' ter race with you an' yer pards ter the lost bonanza. May the best man get thar first. Serve the boy ez you please, flay him alive for the tattooed chart, but touch the Queen ov Steeltrap, an' die like a wolf before California Claude!"

He touched his horse with his spur points as he spoke the name well known among the Sierras and galloped hard away.

Had Claude the Pitiless turned champion for Queen Bess?

A thousand times no!

Let the wild scenes of our California romance tell what he meant.

With sharpened teeth the wolves were ready for the fray.

CHAPTER VI.

MOUNTAIN SHYLOCKS.

ALL through the day which had just passed Queen Bess had kept her discovery from Fearless Frank, who knew nothing of the scenes that had transpired at his couch during the night, so deep and lethargic had been his slumbers.

He had recovered sufficiently to tell the denizens of Steeltrap City that he owed the lasso-marks on his neck to the curse of the placers, California Claude himself, and during his narrative the miners cursed the Pitiless again and again.

Queen Bess wondered what had become of the hunchback whom she had so summarily ejected from the cabin.

Instead of resenting her interference Crooked Tom had disappeared, and Eldorado Eph, who remained in Steeltrap, did not manifest any uneasiness at his absence.

More than once the girl thought she must go to Fearless Frank and tell him what had happened.

It would put him on his guard, and prepare him for the enemies who were plotting against him; but her courage always failed her when it reached the important moment, and, woman-like, she shrank from the confession.

"I wonder if he realizes the importance of the chart he carries on his breast?" the girl asked herself. "He has often talked about Don Diavolo and the lost gold city, and laughingly wished that we might find it, but he has never intimated that he has on his skin a tattoo-mark which might be the missing clew. Didn't the biggest ruffian of the two say, last night, that there were ten thousand men in California who are ready to shed their blood for Frank's map? His words can have but one meaning: the tattoo is the key to the long-lost mine."

It was natural for Queen Bess to reach these conclusions after the events through which she had passed.

"Merciful Heavens! they say they will cut that map out with their bowies!" she exclaimed. "I will warn him. When they come they will find him prepared."

Night was not far away when the Queen of Steeltrap came to this her twentieth resolution to tell the youth all.

She started toward the cabin where she knew Frank was to be found, but when almost within its shadow she came to a sudden halt, and shrank back with a half-articulated cry.

Squatted on the ground was an object which looked like a huge toad, but a second and more scrutinizing observation told the girl that it was a human being.

"It is that human ape that follows Eldorado," she said to herself. "He may be a traitor to his master, the spy of the men who were here last night."

While Queen Bess looked at the dwarf, he did not move a muscle, but appeared to be asleep in his uncomfortable position.

Full of curiosity the girl advanced upon him with noiseless tread and at last, with her hand at a revolver, stood directly over him.

"Look here, sir, what are you doing here?" said Queen Bess, stooping and touching the misshapen form on the shoulder. "If you've come back to follow up your discovery of last night, I want to say that I'm ready to make it hot for you."

As the girl concluded, the unhandsome face of Eldorado's pard was lifted from between the long apish arms, and a pair of little eyes that shone like a pair of carbuncles became riveted upon her.

"Get up and talk to me," continued Bess, without abasing one jot of her sternness. "You are back here for a purpose, and I demand to know what it is."

Crooked Tom, menaced by the girl's look and voice, got upon his feet, and all at once grasped her arm.

"Queen Bess must talk to me," he said. "Who make the gold map on the young man's breast?"

The girl smiled fearlessly.

"You will have to ask some one else," she said.

"Don't you know?"

"I do not."

The hunchback looked disappointed.

"Does he know what it means?"

"I cannot tell you."

"I know. It means gold!—gold! It is the key to the big bonanza—to Don Diavolo's golden grave. Crooked Tom can trace it out. Last night he had another map of it, but it was snatched from his hands."

Queen Bess started with a low cry.

"Say you that there exists a duplicate of the chart on Frank's breast?" she cried.

"Yes, I have held it in these hands; Eldorado's bowie has cut it into strips."

"Where is it now?"

"Ask Claude the Pitiless."

"Did he rob you of it?"

"Yes!" bissed the dwarf.

"Then," said the girl looking up, "when the gold wolves come back I can tell them where they can find another chart."

"Who came after it?"

Queen Bess did not speak.

"Never mind. Crooked Tom will find out," he went on, biting his lip at her silence. "Does he think, fool! that he can carry over his heart the key to Don Diavolo's tomb of gold? I saw it on his bosom for the first time last night. Eldorado hates the yellow lumps, but I—ha! ha!—I love them. Come; let us to him, Queen Bessie, and I will decipher the diagram. I'm good on riddles," and the mountain dwarf chattered again.

"I will not go with you one step," said the girl, resolutely. "You were sneaking here for a purpose when I came up. If I go to Fearless Frank to-night, I go alone."

Instead of taking umbrage at these words Crooked Tom showed his teeth in a perplexing grin.

"Stay where you are," continued Queen Bess as she started forward.

His eyes instantly flashed. "By Jerusalem; you're liable to be an uncrowned queen!" he snapped.

"Look here. There was a man hung in the mountains last night. Eldorado found him an' cut him down, an' might have saved his life if somebody hadn't made certain of the job by shootin' him in my pard's arms."

"Well, what of it?"

"In the bosom of that man was a chart just like the one pricked into Frank's skin, but it was traced on buckskin. Don't you see some connection between the man with the buckskin map an' the boy with the gold trail over his heart?"

Despite her calmness, Queen Bess started again.

"Ha! I saw that arrow hit!" resumed the dwarf moving forward. "There must be a connection somewhat between the two. You must be a good judge of the resemblance between faces. If you will follow me I will show you the man who had the piece of buckskin last night."

"Not now," said the girl. "I am not following uncertain clews and resemblances now. I am going to warn him of impending danger."

"Can't I go with you?"

"No."

"Very well, then. Down yonder lies his cabin. I hope you will find him at home. By and bv. Queen Bess, we will meet again an' under different circumstances I suppose. Goin' to warn him, eh?"

"I have told you," said the girl, drawing back.

"All the womins on earth can't keep that chart on his breast. I speak by the card, my mountain oriole. You expect to stand between him an' the gold vultures of the Sierra! By Jerusalem! you're mad."

Queen Bess did not stop to hear any more, but drew still further back and left the gold-hater's dwarfish pard to himself.

"He's as bad as a rattlesnake," she said to herself. "I wonder if Frank knows that there was killed in the mountain last night a man who possessed the duplicate of his chart?"

She saw the impish figure of the dwarf in the moonlight until a cabin hid it from sight, and

then quickened her steps toward Fearless Frank's cabin.

As she opened the door and saw the young man seated at a table enjoying a meal all alone, her courage again deserted her, and she would have withdrawn if he had not caught sight of her and called her in before she could step back.

Queen Bess went forward blushing and unable to speak.

"Here, sit down and help me discuss my meal," he laughed as he placed a stool near his seat and drew the beautiful girl to it. "I'm nearly recovered from the choking California Claude gave me last night. Heavens! Bess, how my brain swirled when I felt that terrible lasso tightening about my throat! I would have given Don Diavolo's gold for a fair stroke at it with my knife."

The Queen of Steeltrap uttered an exclamation she could not suppress.

What an admirable opportunity for her to tell him all, to put him on his guard!

"Eldorado dropped in here awhile ago," continued Frank.

"Then he told you all."

The youth looked surprised.

"He talked about many things," he said, "and left at last on hunt of Crooked Tom, I suppose."

"Frank," cried Queen Bess, and her hand dropped upon the youth's shoulder in a manner that instantly interested him. "I must tell you what I saw last night, but let me say that the discovery was accidental—'hat—'

She stopped—she knew not why.

"Go on. What did you see?" he asked with a smile.

"The chart tattooed on your breast."

"Oho! the mysterious dots and lines, eh?" he laughed.

"Yes."

"And a wonderful discovery no doubt!" he went on in the same tones of merriment. "There may be people among the mountains fools enough to believe that my tattoo is the key to Don Diavolo's wealth, that I could furnish them with the clew missing for a hundred years—"

"There are such people!" interrupted Queen Bess. "My God! I faced two of them last night in this very room while you slept. There are ten thousand men who would shed their blood for your tattoo. They've been hunting you from one end of the Sierras to the other. Oh, Frank, for heaven's sake, let us go to a country where men do not kill for gold!"

Her face was white, and her voice, full of pleading, was hard to resist.

Yet, he met it with a fearless smile.

"They wouldn't find the mine if they had my map, Bess," he said.

"Then it is not the key to Don Diavolo's wealth?"

"Did I say it was not?"

"No, but—"

"I will tell you what I believe, and that is that the tattoo over my heart is the clew to that buried city of riches. But where lives the man whose brain can trace it out?"

"I may have seen him last night. Heavens! what a penetrating eye that mountain Goliath had in his head. To-morrow we will say farewell to Steeltrap. A sight of your tattoo, Frank, would transform the men of this camp into gold demons."

"I know that," he said calmly.

"And yet you have spent years in this lumbering volcano?"

He did not reply, for at that moment the door flew open as if driven in by a gust of wind.

Queen Bess turned her head, looked a moment, and then sprang to her feet with a loud shriek.

"My God! too late. They are here!" she cried.

Fearless Frank leaped back from the table and sent his hand toward a revolver just as a stern voice filled the cabin.

"Corraled at last, my prize! That's fourteen ov us an' only two ov you. Hands up, er diel. We don't want yer life, Fearless Frank, but eight squar' inches ov skin from over yer heart!"

The echo was a cry from the girl.

Fearless Frank did not stir.

CHAPTER VII.

KENO KIT'S BOWIE.

THE terrible importance of the tattoo must have impressed itself on the youth's mind while he faced the dark faces, blazing eyes and leveled revolvers of Captain Leopard and his band.

Those mountain gold-fiends meant business.

In obedience to the harsh command, Fearless Frank put up his hands, and the foremost ruffians stepped into the cabin.

"We've stole a march on Steeltrap," grinned Captain Leopard. "Its citizens ar' behind the times ef they don't know the importance ov the mark on yer breast. Show up, my daisy pard. Drop yer hands and open yer shirt. I want ter gaze for the first time on the key to the city ov nuggets."

Behind his almost bloodless lips the young man ground his teeth, and without a reply of any kind began to part his dark-blue shirt in the middle.

A shout of exultation burst from Captain Leopard's throat as his eyes fell upon the tattoo displayed by Frank's action and he leaned eagerly forward to scrutinize it from a nearer spot.

"It's the dandy mark an' no mistake!" he continued. "Keno Kit, you warn't mistaken last night. Now, boys, take possession ov the map."

He stepped back, but pointed at the youth while he threw a significant look at the men who backed him in everything.

"Not with your bowies!" exclaimed Queen Bess of Steeltrap as she came forward full of indignation.

"Who talked about knives, my she wild-cat?" asked the leader of the Sierra toughs. "We came hyer for thot thar map, an' we're goin' not away without it. Don't lift yer voice, Queen of Steeltrap, er by Jerusalem, we may leave you hyer dead."

Despite the fearful menace, the girl would have replied in language not calculated to soothe the desperado's passion, if a glance from Fearless Frank had not caught her eye.

"Thet's right, boy," said Captain Leopard to Frank as he caught the look midway. "Quiet her with a look. You know what's good for the girl."

In less than a minute afterward Fearless Frank was a prisoner in the midst of the fourteen ruffians, and Queen Bess, bound and gagged in no gentle manner, was the sole occupant of the little cabin.

The expedition, the swoop of the gold-hunters had proved successful, and the key to Don Diavolo's wealth had fallen into their hands!

One by one they had crept into Steeltrap after dark, all meeting at an appointed rendezvous, thus avoiding the miners nearly all of whom fortunately for Captain Leopard and his men were at Flush Phil's gambling saloon at the southern end of the camp.

To convey Fearless Frank to the horses conveniently near was the work of several minutes, and when Captain Leopard saw him placed between Bluffer and Keno Kit, he gave the command for the whole band to gallop off.

Not a muscle of the boy's face quivered.

If his eyes flashed, it was deep behind his long black lashes; if he shut his hands, it was when the men of gold were not looking.

For one hour the fifteen galloped hard over the mountain trails, and at the end of that time a clear "halt!" from Captain Leopard stopped every horse.

Fearless Frank raised his head, and looked around as if he was trying to recognize the halting-place.

The mountain men looked to their leader for orders.

"Frank, my boy," said Captain Leopard, riding up to the prisoner whose hands had been bound to his back while his limbs were lashed to the saddle. "I needn't say ag'in thot me an' my thirteen ar' thot luckiest galoots to-night in California. We've found what ten thousand men hev been lookin' for fer years—the trail to Don Diavolo. But one thing puzzles me, an' thot is thot you hevn't enriched yerself. Why hevn't you, boy?"

For a moment a smile played with the corners of Fearless Frank's mouth, and a twinkling light appeared in the depths of his eyes.

"I am content with what I have," he said.

"Ho! ho!" laughed Captain Leopard. "Content ter starve in Steeltrap when you carried the key ter millions? I don't believe thot. You know whar it is, Fearless Frank?"

"Where what is?"

"The lost bonanza."

"I never saw it."

Captain Leopard's brow darkened that instant.

"No lies an' no foolin'!" he hissed. "We prefer ter hev you guide us to the bonanza, for we know that you hevn't carried the key on yer breast for years without knowin' how ter use it."

"I don't know."

For a moment the captain of the gold-fiends looked the captive in the eye without moving his lips.

"Lies cost lives in California," he said at last, in tones calculated to intimidate. "Dare you say to us thot you don't know whar the mine is?"

"I say it truthfully."

"Then, by the stars! we ar' compelled to leave you hyer—without the map!"

As he finished, Captain Leopard turned to his men and continued:

"Take the youngster from the boss an' fasten him to a tree in the best position for operating."

Half a dozen hands were stretched forward to obey the orders, and a moment later Fearless Frank was being released from an imprisonment which had grown decidedly uncomfortable.

He was taken from the saddle and carried to a small tree which held a leaning attitude, so that when he was lashed to it and his breast

bared, exposing the tattoo, he almost occupied the position of a patient on an operating-table.

Two torches which burned brilliantly threw a red glare over this animated tableau, and the youth, who spoke no more, saw Keno Kit roll up his sleeves with the nonchalance of a butcher, and draw forth a huge bowie, whose blade reflected the glare of the lights.

"Don't take a bit ov surplus hide, Keno," said Captain Leopard, with a grim smile, as the giant player stood ready awaiting orders to begin the diabolical work. "We don't want an ounce ov meat, nor a drop ov blood. We only want the map thot covers his heart."

"I'm a daisy stripper, cap'n," laughed Keno Kit, as he reached Frank's side by a great stride, and raised his left hand and with the dark forefinger drew a circle around the tattooed chart.

"Hold!" exclaimed Captain Leopard. "I want a little information about that map first."

The next instant he was looking down into Fearless Frank's face.

"Who gave you that chart, boy?" he asked, pointing at the diagram.

"A man."

"Ov course, but who was he?"

"My father, perhaps; but I cannot say."

"Is it because you do not know?"

"Yes."

"How long have you carried it?"

"Ever since I was a boy of eight."

Captain Leopard looked astonished, and to the surprise of his men began to count his fingers reflectively.

Fearless Frank watched him with as much curiosity as did his men, and both parties wondered what would be the result of the count.

Captain Leopard stopped suddenly. "What's yer age now?" he abruptly asked.

"Twenty-one."

"Perdition!" And the ruffian's teeth were heard to crack behind the hissed exclamation.

The following second he threw his sombrero on the ground and ground it into the dust beneath his heel; his face grew dark as if a thunder-cloud had settled upon it, and behind it his eyes seemed lightning flashes of fury.

"I'll do the carvin', Keno!" he thundered, as he wheeled upon the ready giant, and, at the risk of cutting himself, tore the bowie from his hand. "I'll not be particular about blood an' flesh, either. Stand back, my gold-wolves, an' I'll show you the neatest and quickest job ov dissection thot ever delighted yer eyes. Twenty-one years old, you say, my young galoot? Eight from thot number leaves thirteen!"

The men drew back, and as Captain Leopard in two passes threw back his sleeves, he stepped forward and his left hand fell like an eagle's talons upon the youth's breast.

"I'm goin' ter take every line an' dot," he flung into Frank's face. "What ten thousand men have sought for in vain, I get at the bowie's point."

"All right," said the youth, speaking for the first time in many seconds. "Take the map that has been my curse and find it useless."

The bowie that had almost touched the prisoner's flesh was suddenly lifted, and Captain Leopard straightened with an oath.

"Useless! In what way?" he cried.

"There's another chart in existence," said Fearless Frank calmly. "Last night it fell into the hands of California Claude."

"We kin beat him to the bonanza," said the ruffian. "What's one man ag'in fourteen?"

"But that isn't all. Seven years ago I was snake-bitten in the breast while asleep, and when the wound healed three of the most important marks of the tattoo had disappeared. You can see a clear place near the center of the chart."

Captain Leopard held his breath as he bent down to investigate.

"It is true," he cried. "I can see the old wound, but we'll get along without the missing part. We'll all beat California Claude to Don Diavolo. Eight from twenty-one leaves thirteen. I mustn't forget that. Fearless Frank, I'll take the map now!"

Again the ruffian's hand dropped upon the youth's flesh, and as the bowie drew the first drop of blood, it fell from the hand that wielded it, and Captain Leopard straightened with a half throttled yell.

An arrow had transfixed his throat, and the barb protruded under his chin!

CHAPTER VIII.

KEEPING A SECRET.

CERTAIN events destined to prove of thrilling interest to the gold-hunting inhabitants of the Sierra, followed fast upon the heels of Captain Leopard's departure from Steeltrap City with his prisoner.

Queen Bess, as we have seen, was left alone gagged and bound in the robbed cabin.

She was incapable of making the slightest movement or outcry, and smothering her anger as best she could, while the cruel gag almost killed her, she began to wait for assistance which she hoped would relieve her soon.

The minutes seemed hours as they passed over the girl's head, and she watched the candle left burning on the table as it neared its end, flickering on the downward march.

It was not until the hour was closing out its

existence that a sound entered the cabin and startled the girl.

A moment later she saw the door open and a bearded face adorned with curious eyes appeared at the threshold.

"Hello! nobody at home," said a hoarse voice, and the speaker was about to withdraw when the girl by strenuous efforts made a noise.

"Somebody's in, anyway," continued the man as he stepped inside. "Hang me, ef Ruth-in' hezn't happened hyer. By Jerusalem! Queen Bess on the floor tied an' gagged! Who's been hyer, daisy?" and the bronze hands of the stalwart Steeltrapper lifted the girl from the boards and began to release her.

Bess could hardly wait till the man had put an end to the fearful torture she had undergone, and the first few moments she used to get her breath.

"Now," said the miner, "tell me all about it. Whar's Frank?"

The girl hesitated, so visibly that her visitor must have noticed it.

What, tell him all?

That meant all about the tattoo mark, and the secret which Fearless Frank had kept from them during his life in Steeltrap.

She knew Bonita Ben as the man was called to whom she owed her rescue.

There might have been men in Steeltrap to whom she could have intrusted her secret, but she dared not tell him.

So she said:

"The men who gagged me took Frank off with them. I don't know where they went. They call their leader Captain Leopard, and their second man is one Keno Ki."

"They're ther sunflowers what did it, ar' they?" ejaculated Bonita Ben. "They're ther chaps what hev be'n huntin' ther lost gold city these five years. Ef any set ov men deserve it for hard work they're the chaps. Come hyer an' took Frank off, eb! Don't they know thot Steeltrap stands by its citizens through thick an' thin?"

"They will know it!" said the girl.

"But what do they want with the boy?" asked Bonita, suddenly. "Is he in any way connected with Don Diavolo's agency?"

"I did not ask them," answered Queen Bess, evasively. "They came to Steeltrap like sneaking wolves, one by one, and burst in upon us like a thunderclap."

"What did they say?"

Bonita Ben was getting too inquisitive.

It seemed to Bess that he was slightly suspicious.

"I—I don't remember all their remarks," she said. "I know that they came, that they captured Frank, and left me bound on the floor."

"Then, by Heavens! we'll pay 'em back!" flashed Ben. "I war lucky ter come along when I did. I thought I'd come up an' ask thot boy for thot loan ov several ounces. They broke me entirely down at thot place, an' fortune always turns for me when I start in fresh. Lucky—warn't it?—thet I dropped in when I did."

Bess said "yes," though she inwardly wished that one less inquisitive than Bonita Ben had "dropped in."

"Kin yer walk down ter Flush Phil's?" he suddenly asked. "Ther pards ar' all thar, an' you kin tell 'em about thot swoop better than I could deliver yer narrative."

"I'd rather stay here."

"On account ov weakness! By Jehu! I'll tote ye down. You're no weight for me, Bess," and before she could remonstrate, the Queen of Steeltrap found herself in Bonita Ben's stalwart arms, and he was striding with her through the moonlight toward Flush Phil's saloon and gambling-den.

"You'll make thot boys howl for revenge!" he chuckled to her as he carried her along with rapid strides. "Won't they shake thot glasses behind Phil's counter? When fourteen skunks steal into Steeltrap an' carry off one ov its citizens, it looks as if Steeltrap war asleep."

Bonita Ben did not pause until he strode across the threshold of the well-lighted resort, and announced his presence to its inmates in his well-known voice, and in language more forcible than elegant.

"Hell's broke loose in Steeltrap!" he exclaimed, as he placed Queen Bess on her feet and roused every man in Flush Phil's place.

In a second the pair were surrounded by a crowd of anxious men, whose looks were interrogatives, and whose hands had already leaped to the butts of revolvers.

"Give Queen Bess air, an' let her spin her tale ov insult ter Steeltrap!" said Bonita Ben to the dark-skinned toughs. "Let her tell you how Captain Leopard an' his pards came an' went; how—"

The sentence was broken by fierce exclamations, which showed the girl the temper of the crowd that surrounded her, and upon her all eyes became riveted.

"Now," said Bonita addressing her. "Go ahead an' give us thot whole lay-out."

"Yes, ther full story. Keep nothin' back," said a dozen voices.

The young girl took in her surroundings before she spoke.

California Claude, the Lone Bandit.

She saw that she was completely hemmed in by the crowd, and that the prevailing disposition was not to let her out until she had told a story in every way entirely satisfactory to them.

"Forge ahead with yer varn, Bess," said several impatient fellows. "Give us ther hull outfit."

Forced to proceed, the Queen of Steeltrap began and without compromising the secret of the tattoo, narrated the swoop of Captain Leopard and his band upon the cabin, the capture of Fearless Frank, her own ill-treatment, and the departure of the mountain trailers.

She was listened to with the greatest attention, and all the time was conscious that they believed she was keeping something back.

"We'll pay 'em for that swoop!" arose on every side as Bess finished. "We'll make Cap'n Leopard an' his pards wish they'd never seen Steeltrap. You needn't take a hand in this game, Bess. We'll play it cl'ar through with bowie an' revolver. But what's Fearless Frank to 'em?—that's what tembles my racket. Why didn't they take Bonita, thar, or D'rango Jack, or you, Bess?"

There was no reply on the girl's part.

"I tell you they took Frank because he was worth the most to 'em!" exclaimed Bonita Ben. "Thar's a mystery hyer, but we kin cl'ar it up. Them pards live for one thing only—ter find Don Diavolo an' his golden grave. They work always with that end in view. Now, that's California Claude. He lassos, and shoots an' robs because he likes the bizness. I'll risk my teeth that the gold mine never worries him."

"But he wouldn't toss it over his shoulder," suggested a miner with a laugh.

"Of course not. Who would?" continued Bonita Ben. "We'd like ter make that ten-strike ourselves; we'd give our blood for the old chart which they say is in existence somewhere. If we'd find it tattooed on a man's skin, ez some people say it is, by Jerusalem! we'd cut it out with the best bowies in the Gold Range!"

Queen Bessie started and with difficulty kept back an exclamation of horror.

"Now, you kin go back to ther cabin," said Bonita coming to her relief at the right moment. "Shall I help you back, Bess?"

"No. I know the way, and am quite stout ag'in," answered the girl quickly, and as she moved backward the crowd parted and showed her a pathway to the door.

Eager to get beyond the precincts of the, to her, unpleasant place, the Queen of Steeltrap lost no time in seeking the moonlight.

"They more than half suspect the truth," she said to herself. "Bonita Ben believes that I've kept something back. They want the key to the golden tomb as badly as Captain Leopard does. They will fight for it. I might basteon Frank's rescue by telling them the truth, but heavens! it would be placing him in the power of a new set of gold-devils. I will not do it. Perish the secret with me, rather!"

She quickened her gait and ran down the thoroughfare that led past Fearless Frank's now tenantless cabin.

The door stood ajar wide enough for her to enter, but she did not disturb its solitude.

Five minutes later she placed one hand on the saddle which she had adjusted on the back of a horse whose very limbs suggested fleetness.

"I'll hunt them down myself!" she exclaimed with resolution. "If it is to be a fight for the possession of Don Diavolo's gold, I propose to be in at the death!"

"That's right, my mountain queen," said a voice that thrilled every fiber of her frame. "That's right an' I'll be thar, too!"

Of course the girl started and turned at these words.

"Merciful heavens! I thought you swore to leave this country!" fell from her lips. "California Claude, is this the way you keep your oaths?"

She saw plainly the elegant figure of the Curse of the Placers, and noted, too, the fearless smile that crossed his face in response to her startled look and words.

He never looked so handsome as then, with the front brim of his soft sombrero thrown back, his laced jacket open in front displaying the embroidered bosom of his shirt, and with his black hair lying in brigandish abandon on his ample shoulders.

"Pardon me, Queen Bess," he said with a low bow. "I never take much stock in pistol-forced' oaths. The truth is, I have a holy contempt for them. You were going away, I see. Don't let me disappoint you. Mount your horse, and California Claude will be your companion."

The girl instinctively drew back, her eyes fastened on the coolest desperado she had ever encountered.

"I haven't been to Steeltrap for an age, an', havin' found you, I sha'n't tarry hyer," he went on. "We'll both be in at the death, girl. If you have no objections I'll make you a regular bonanza queen, thus payin' you back for forcin' me to swear last night!"

"That is a case in which it takes two to make a bargain," said Bess. "I was about to leave Steeltrap and alone. California Claude, you had better reconsider your determination and ride to the coast."

"Not yet," he laughed. "My dear child, you haven't got acquainted with Claude the Pitiless. The mountain placers know me best. I could throw Steeltrap into convulsions within three minutes."

"And get yourself riddled with bullets," said Bess.

"Indeed? What have you to wager on it?"

"My ring!" cried the girl; and slipping a gold ring from her finger, she held it up before the handsome desperado.

"I accept. My hat against the ring. It is a wager, eh? Hyer, hold the stakes, an' meet me hyer at the end of ten minutes."

He handed her his sombrero as he spoke, and before she could remonstrate or disclaim the bet, he was walking away toward Flush Phil's ranch, shaking his leonine locks, and with a cocked revolver in each hand.

Queen Bess could not but admire him.

CHAPTER IX.

STEELTRAP'S MAD NIGHT.

THERE was something thrilling in the march of California Claude toward the favorite haunt of a hundred men who thirsted for his blood.

He had played mountain bandit so long and so often that everybody in the Sierra cordially hated him, and hundreds had trailed him, but in vain.

More than once he had appeared at a gambling-table under a tree in the midst of a gold camp, coolly pocketed the glittering stakes, and rode off with the booty before the astonished gamblers could cover him.

During the exhibition of these remarkable and dare-devil feats, there was always a strange twinkle in his black eyes and a fearless smile at the corners of his mouth.

He had aptly been named the Curse of the Placers, and had, beyond doubt, a right to his second name—Claude the Pitiless.

It was said that his lasso never missed, and all the men found hanging in the mountains were added to California Claude's score by his enemies.

Such was the man who, bareheaded, with his hat wagered against a young girl's ring, walked straight toward the last place common-sense would ask him to seek.

"He is in terrible earnest!" exclaimed Queen Bess, when she had watched him a moment.

"Well, let him go. When the pards of Steeltrap get through with him, he'll never break another oath."

California Claude pursued his walk, and did not slack his gait until he saw the open door of Flush Phil's ranch.

He threw a quick glance over his shoulder, as if to see whether he was followed, and then looked at his revolvers in the moonlight.

"I guess I'm ready to make the Steeltrappers dance to my music," he murmured. "I saw by the girl's eyes that she thought I wouldn't take the bet; she thought I'd back out of the picnic, but thus far her acquaintance with Claude Cottard has been limited."

The next moment his faultless figure appeared in the light that streamed from the gaming den, and in another second his left foot touched the threshold.

"Great God! California Claude!" exclaimed several voices at once, and in tones calculated to stir the most interested gambler at the tables.

Twenty men started back from the counter, as many more leaped up from the benches ranged along the monte and peco tables, and throughout the room was heard the musical clickings of pistol-locks.

As cool as coolness itself, California Claude faced these demonstrations, with the old glitter in his eyes, and the old smile on his lips.

"You must bev ordered yer coffin, California," exclaimed a stalwart miner as he came toward the sport, pushing his way through the wild-eyed men with his dark hand around the butt of a six-shooter.

"Not yet. The tree that's to furnish it hasn't sprouted yet," said Claude, the Pitiless.

"Thet's a lie!" was the retort. "I'm Steelfist Saul an' the stakes you raked in last Christmas night at Moblaw Ranch war mine!"

"Yours, eh?" laughed the desperado coolly.

"Mine! an' you drop hyer for that theft, I say!"

Steelfist Saul had reached the head of the crowd, and his last word seemed a signal for the lifting of his revolver.

But the eye of the Sierra sport caught the movement before it could be executed, and at the sharp report that filled the den for a moment Steelfist Saul reeled against his nearest backers!

The effect of this shot was instant and thrilling.

The crowd staggered back, thunderstruck for a moment, as the first victim, already dead, hit the floor with a dull thud.

California Claude knew that their recovery would be the work of a second, so stepping toward their revolvers he threw up both hands and opened on the whole lot.

It is impossible to describe the scene that followed.

Men tumbled every way before the two re-

volver which the mountain scourge worked with the utmost ease, his left hand being as serviceable as his right.

So rapid and terrible was his shooting that the startled denizens of Steeltrap could not, as Bonita Ben afterward expressed it, get a shot in edgeways.

He threw the whole crowd into confusion, and without a shot having been fired at him, he lowered his weapons and sprung backward to the door.

This deadly scene had not lasted ten seconds and it was not until the sport had gained the moonlight again and slipped new cartridges into the smoky chambers, that the terror-stricken pards of Steeltrap City got possession of their faculties.

There was more than one man on the plank floor who would mine no more, and between the eyes of all there were dark red marks reminders to the living of California Claude's unerring marksmanship.

"Jerusalem! what a killer!" gasped Bonita Ben, the first man of the lot to break the silence. "Hyer, Phil! set out yer nerve food," and the speaker reached the counter, but not before he had shot a glance toward the door.

Flush Phil poked his blanched face above the counter beneath which he had taken refuge at the first shot, and set a bottle before Bonita Ben.

"Did you lay out the shootin' machine?" asked the proprietor of the place as the customer raised the bottle.

"Wal, I shoud whisper that we didn't," was the answer. "If he's goin' ter take spells like that, I'm goin' ter emigrate. I wouldn't stay byer for Don Diavolo's mine an' that's ther richest thing I ever heard ov."

Down went the draught which Bonita Ben had poured into the glass, and he brought his iron fist down upon the counter with noisy emphasis.

That seemed to rouse the men behind him.

It was a signal for a rush to the bar, and they stormed forward over the dead men who lay on the floor, and climbed over the counter with curses until Flush Phil's face grew whiter than ever.

He knew there was no money in that crowd just then, and he had too much sense to resist their vociferous demands.

Therefore he did the best thing he could do under the circumstances—stepped back and let the pards of Steeltrap take full possession of his stock.

For five minutes the crowd helped itself to the liquors stored behind and under the counter, but there was no malicious destruction of property: the men were drinking to restore the equilibrium overthrown by California Claude's startling shots, and when they stepped back, their eyes flared, and they were ready to wade into any scene of blood.

All at once there was a rush for the door and the mad men of Steeltrap poured pell-mell into the moonlight.

If California Claude was within hearing distance, he must have heard the loud anathemas heaped upon his name, coupled with oaths of the direst vengeance.

It was undoubtedly Steeltrap's wildest night. What had become of the cool sport of the Sierra, the man who had killed for a ring?

Queen Bess started when she heard the first shot which told her that the battle had opened.

Then came the quick reports that succeeded it, and she listened on, but holding her breath.

Suddenly the silence of the grave fell over all; the last shot died away as suddenly as the first had sounded in her ears, and she exclaimed:

"I've got a hat for a trophy of his last exploit. Claude the Pitiless, you walked into the lion's den, and got torn up for your pains."

She slipped the ring back on her finger, and fell to examining the lace that encircled the sombrero.

Suddenly she became aware that somebody was near by, and looking up she gave one glance to the figure beside her saddle, and recoiled with a gasping cry:

"My God! you here alive!"

The first response was a laugh.

"It wasn't a two-minutes' picnic, Bess," said the man already recognized as California Claude, as he ran his right hand through his black locks and shook them loose from his shoulders. "I'll corral the stakes now if you've no objection." And he held out his soft brown hand for hat and ring.

The girl hesitated, not because he had not fairly won the bet, but out of astonishment at seeing him there after all the revolver-shots the winds had borne to her ears.

"I did all the shootin'," he went on as he smiled. "The first shot paralyzed the hull crowd, an' I had it my own way."

"And you killed without mercy?" said Bess.

"Kinder so, I guess. Don't they call me Claude the Pitiless? An' what's the use of havin' a name like that if you don't keep up its reputation?"

The Queen of Steeltrap made no reply, but glanced at the ring for which Claude was evidently waiting.

"I'll take the ring with its mistress," he sud-

denly said. "Queen Bessie, you will ride with me from Steeltrap to-night."

"As your prisoner?" cried the girl.

"No, only as my pard," he laughed.

"Never!" was the response. "Claude the Pitiless, I ride with no man who breaks an oath wit'in the hour that witnessed its taking."

He gave a low whistle, and there bounded from the shadow of a rock a horse, which halted beside him.

"You see I'm ready for the ride," he said looking into the girl's face from the saddle, into which he sprung without touching the stirrups. "Now, my daisy, we are off. Let me whisper in your ear that I hold the key to the lost gold city, and that if you behave yourself, I'll crown you queen ov Don Diavolo's realm."

She did not stir, but gazed into his face, merciless and cool.

"Did I surprise you?" he went on. "Have you thought the old legend a myth?"

"I knew it is not," she said. "But you do not hold the only key."

"I know it, but mine is the one that will unlock the golden doors. I may have to fight my way to the yellow city, but what ov thet? I know that the other key is tattooed on Fearless Frank's breast, but Captain Leopard an' his pards have cut it out before this."

Bess uttered a wild cry, and seemed on the point of falling from the saddle when Claude's hand darted forward and grasped her wrist.

"No faintin' hyer!" he said in stern tones. "Remember that I am Claude the Pitiless, an' that you are queen ov the realm of gold. Furthermore, for the lover you've lost I'll find you another who will never be hunted for a map on his breast!"

The tightening of the hand at her wrist seemed to give the girl new nerves and strength.

"Listen to Bess of Steeltrap City," she cried, leaning toward the placer curse. "I am going with you, but you must promise to show me Captain Leopard and his gang."

"I'll do that. We've got to meet somewhar between hyer an' the lost bonanza. I'll give you a chance ter get even with the bull set. Come, my daisy pard. Steeltrap may wake up soon, an' I've killed enough for awhile."

A moment afterward two horses dashed side by side over one of the several trails leading from Steeltrap City, and Queen Bess seemed satisfied with her new companion.

CHAPTER X.

THE MAP IN THE TRAIL.

At the same moment, almost, that California Claude left the dead and living occupants of Flush Phil's, a singular-looking specimen of humanity threw himself on all fours in a spot of moonshine a short distance from Steeltrap, and with his finger began to make strange marks in the earth.

Need we say that it was Crooked Tom, the dwarf, whose love for gold overtopped all other passions?

"I've got it pretty well fastened on my mind, an' if I can reduce it to a diagram, I will study the whole thing out. In the first place, I must keep away from Eldorado for a few days, or until I have got at the bottom of the mystery. After that we'll dissolve partnership altogether, an' I'll proceed to make myself king of the lost bonanza. How does that do for a starter? Pretty well, I thank you," and the misshapen lump drew back and surveyed his work with evident satisfaction.

He had produced from memory numerous lines, dots and figures which wonderfully resembled the so-called key to the lost gold city, and Crooked Tom had a right to congratulate himself on his success.

The moonlight fell abov: the spot he had chosen for his task, and plainly revealed the chart traced in the soft ground of the trail with his finger.

"It may be near an' it may lie among the R'ckies," he went on in deep study. "But wherever it is, I'm goin' to find it. That's a wonderful chart I saw on the young man's bosom when Queen Bess pounced upon me an' hustled me out of the shanty. I never touched ground till she plumped me down with more force than ceremony an' jumbled all my bones together. One of these fine days, my smart lady, I'll make my fingers meet in your throat, an' then Steeltrap will have to skirmish around for anotner queen. One of these fine days, I say. Never mind."

Suddenly forgetting the girl whom he cordially hated, the dwarf fell again to the work before him, and added a few more lines to the map in the trail.

His recollection was marvelous.

As far as he had gone, he had reproduced the mysterious chart with wonderful truthfulness, and when he had finished his labors, he began to study it with his chin resting between his hands.

His eyes grew brighter while he worked mentally at the mystery, but at times they would suddenly lose their sharpness, as if he had drifted into a maze that puzzled him.

"I seem to catch the bull thing, but the next moment it gets away from me," he exclaimed.

"I'll get it, though, if it takes twenty years. It isn't very near this spot, for the lines suggest no familiar places. How does it look from a distance?"

He answered his own question by getting upon his feet and surveying the chart in the trail with folded arms.

"By Jerusalem! if Eldorado hadn't distinguished himself by cutting the buckskin chart up I might have been at the bottom of the puzzle before this!" he growled. "He thinks of nothin' but how to hate gold, an' I think it's the prettiest an' handiest thing on earth. There's millions in those lines an' figures on the ground thar. Jehosaphat!"

The dwarf's exclamation fell from his lips as he staggered back, and almost fell against the rocky wall of the trail.

Where the chart had been lay a boulder twice as big as his head, and in its terrible descent from above it had missed him only by a hair's breadth to crush the map out of existence, and also to tell him that he was trying to fathom a dangerous mystery.

For a moment Crooked Tom gaz'd madly at the stone, then he wheeled and shook his clinched hand at the crags overhead.

"If that rock was thrown at my head, I owe you one, miserable skunk, whoever you are!" he vociferated. "I beg leave to inform you that the mountain hunchback still lives, an' that he will reach the golden city first of all. Come down here, an' show yerself. Don't think that Crooked Tom is without means of defense. He's little, but mighty, an' can send the steel he carries deep into his insulter's breast. Oh, I'm a daisy—a regular rattler when I'm trod on, an' my bite is pisen! Come down an' taste my steel. Oh, you coward! you daren't show yourself in my path!"

The dwarf of the Sierra cut a ludicrous figure as he stood in the trail, shaking his knife at the tall peaks and trees overhead.

His shock of dark hair, torn and tossed by wind and rain, added to his grotesque appearance, and his little orbs, scintillating with rage, resembled two diamonds.

He was certain that the rock had not dropped upon his map by chance, but that some one overhead had thrown it, evidently with the intention of putting an end to his own existence, as well as of destroying the key to the lost bonanza.

Not a word in response to the dwarf's challenge came down the mountain-side; the only sound he heard was the echo of his own words.

All at once Crooked Tom sprung to the stone and tried to lift it from the map, but it had buried itself in the yielding ground, and he found his task no easy one.

He tugged away, sweating and growling over his work, and constantly heaping epithets upon the head of the person who had cast it.

Now he would have it half up from the hollow, and now it would slip from his hands and fall back again.

"I could eat you blood-raw!" cried the dwarf, suddenly quitting his task and shaking his hands at the unknown with more ire than before. "I'm a mite, I know, but I've got a spacious maw. Come down hyer an' test it, miserable hound!"

This time a loud laugh answered the dwarf, and the next second a figure dropped upon the trail before him,

"Jerusalem!" ejaculated the gold-hater's pard, as he recoiled several feet, narrowly missing the stone which would have tripped him without ceremony.

"I should gently remark," was the reply. "See hyer, pardner, ef you don't turn yer attention ter better things than gold, a stone may drop on yer head one ov these days. Did I spile yer pictur?" and with a perplexing grin the speaker—Eldorado Eph—moved forward to where the stone lay.

Crooked Tom eyed him madly for a moment, and his hand mechanically sought the hilt of his bowie.

He saw Eldorado's back turned toward him for a moment, and silently whipping out the knife, he bounded forward.

"We'll quit here, Eldorado!" fell in snake-like hisses from his tongue.

"What're ye up ter?" suddenly asked the gold-hater, wheeling upon the dwarf as if he had caught the import of the hissed words. "What! ar' ye goin' ter tickle Eldorado with that mountin' toothpick? I raythur guess not, mv shapely infant!"

Surprised at the gold-hater's unexpected change of position, Crooked Tom stopped short, and the knife almost dropped from his hand.

"Did you throw that rock at my head?" he asked.

"No; at ther infernal map you traced in ther trail," was the prompt reply. "A pard ev mine must be a mountain pauper like myself. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but I've dissolved partnership with you."

Eldorado appeared surprised.

"When did you do that?"

"Awhile ago."

"Without consultin' ther senior member ov ther firm?"

"Yes," snapped the dwarf.

"I repudiate ther dissolution! You can't cut loose from this chick in ther manner. I won't stand it, an' besides—"

"Hark! horses!" ejaculated Tom.

The two occupants of the trail drew back to the shadow of its wall.

Crooked Tom's ears had not deceived him, for after a minute of waiting two horses dashed past, carrying their riders down the mountain road.

"Great Jebu!" cried Eldorado. "Did you know them, Tom?"

The dwarf's eyes glistened.

"I ought ter," he said. "One war the Queen ov Steeltrap, who hustled me out ov ther young galoot's shanty t'other night, an' the other was the biggest devil in California."

"Californy Claude!" ejaculated the gold-hater.

"What has happened? Bess hasn't jined bands with him, has she?"

"It looks that way."

"I won't b'lieve it. It can't be. She ordered him out ov ther kentry at the muzzle of her repeater, an' now she rides with him. I'm stumped, pard."

The dwarf made no reply, but watched Eldorado, who, completely nonplussed, was gazing down the trail in the direction taken by the galloping pair.

All at once he wheeled and went to the spot where the boulder had obliterated the chart.

Lifting it with apparent ease, he held it above his head for a moment, and then sent it down into the hollow again with all his force.

The action made the dwarf's teeth meet hard.

"Go on! have your way," he grated. "But I'll have your blood for this night's work!"

We shall see.

CHAPTER XI.

UNTIED.

IT is not our intention to lose sight of Fearless Frank whom we left in the hands of Captain Leopard and his gang of mountain pards, but ere we return to him, let us see who fired the arrow which pierced the captain's neck just as he was about to rob the boy of his precious chart.

The barbed missile came from some point overhead, and if the desperadoes could have penetrated the shadows of crag and tree, they might have seen the marksman.

He stood on the very point of a spur of rock holding a bow in his left hand while he gazed eagerly downward at the group revealed by the torches.

The upper part of his face was concealed by a soft mask, and the portion displayed showed a well-cut chin and a pair of resolute lips.

His size was nothing remarkable; he was well built and agile looking; perhaps a man in the prime of life.

His shot was proof enough that he knew how to handle the Indian's favorite weapon, and from his elevated station he could see Captain Leopard standing in the torch-light and heard him heap maledictions terrible upon his head.

The sight below made his lips part with a pleased smile:

"I hit the captain hard," he said in not unmusical tones. "How he writhes like a wounded panther! By Jove I'd rather drive a shaft into his weazin' than win a gold mine. You are my bitterest foe Albert Leopard, and your time will come. You want the gold map. I'll give it to you before you die! I know the boy you war about to dissect. Shed his blood if you dare! When your mountain wolves reach the big bonanza, you'll not head them, captain. Your floggers shall not close on one of Don Diavolo's nuggets. I will strike the fiend who killed once on the old Santa Fe trail. Tumble into your men's arms with a scratch. You haven't the endurance of a baby."

Captain Leopard who had staggered back into the arms of his delectable associates, was immediately surrounded by the whole crowd, but his frightful oaths kept everybody from interfering with the arrow in his throat.

He howled in exquisite pain whenever it was touched, and cursed the marksman till the very air seemed to become sulphureous.

It was a scene that possessed many ludicrous points.

"You can't bev a doctor, cap'n, ef you go on that way," ventured Keno Kit. "Suthin's got ter be done with that Injun shaft, an' that mighty soon. I kin draw it through—"

"Without hurtin' me?" interrupted the mountain ruffian.

"I won't promise."

Captain Leopard ground his teeth till they seemed to crack.

"I expect I'll have ter submit ter ther operation," he said. "Hold me so I can't kick, boys, an' let Keno go ter work. When I holler you must let go," and he fixed his eyes on the self-constituted surgeon.

"All right," said Keno Kit with a meanful wink at the men who stood around. "Now, hold still a minute, cap'n. I'll be ez soft ez a kitten."

A moment later the bronzed fingers of Keno

Kit seized the shaft just behind the barb, and drew it forward carefully while he did not once look into Captain Leopard's eyes.

"Thar! thar! Jehosaphat!" suddenly yelled the captain of the Sierra pards, but his eyes suddenly dilated a moment afterward when Keno held the arrow up to his gaze.

"Out it is, cap'n," smiled Keno. "I see you've survived the shock. Fortunately, that shaft missed all the vital places, but by Jerusalem! it didn't give the jug'lar much space ter play in."

Captain Leopard put his hand to his neck and felt the wounds inflicted by the shaft.

His inspection told him that his escape from death had been a very narrow one.

Fortune seemed to be favoring him.

"What's become ov the boy?" he suddenly asked. "I'll bet my teeth that you've forgot all about him."

"Oh, he's safe, cap'n," said Keno Kit. "We hed forgot 'im, but thar he is—"

"By heavens! he's gone!"

This announcement seemed to paralyze the whole crowd.

"I told you so!" roared Captain Leopard springing forward to the spot where Fearless Frank had been secured to the leaning tree. "It didn't take all ov ye ter docter me, did it? Whar's the big bonanza now?" and he faced the astonished men from among a lot of captiveless bonds that lay on the ground.

There was no reply until Keno Kit had walked forward and examined the cords.

"Cut they ar', cap'n, an' with yer bowie, too."

A howl of rage burst from Captain Leopard's throat.

"With my knife?" he echoed.

"Yes; byer it is," and Keno extended a bowie toward the maddened villain.

"That's your knife, Keno."

"I own it ov course, but it's the one you war handlin' when the arrer struck you."

"How did the boy get it?"

"Thet's somewhat ov a mystery, but it must hav fallen handy for him when it dropped from yer hands."

Captain Leopard was completely nonplussed, and for a moment too enraged to speak.

"If thet accursed arrow hadn't come when it did, I'd hav thet gold map! Now, heaven knows whar it is. You should hav watched the boy."

"Tied ez he war, cap'n?"

"Yes."

"The next time we'll know better."

The chief of the gold-hunters did not speak.

"We'll trail him down," Keno Kit went on. "Now thet we know thet Fearless Frank has the golden chart on his breast we'll hunt him to the gates ov perdition, but what we find him. Don Diavolo's mine isn't goin' to slip through our fingers in this manner. When yer neck hez healed, cap'n—"

"We wait for no wounds to heal up!" thundered Captain Leopard, and he seemed to increase an inch in stature as he spoke. "We strike the youngster's trail to-night—now! He has the map we want an' I'll flay him the next time certain. It warn't Queen Bess who saved him this time. He did it himself; thet infernal knife fell from my hands just right for him. This wound is only a scratch. I bellowed like a baby on account ov it, didn't I, pards?"

"You squealed a little, thet's a fact, cap'n, but that was natural," smiled Keno Kit. "You'd better put yer handkerchief around your neck."

"Thet's good advice, Keno Kit," came down from overhead at that moment, and in tones that startled every one on whose ears it fell. "I take pleasure in informing you thet that shaft was poisoned."

"Pisened! Jerusalem!" almost shrieked Captain Leopard recoiling a foot as his face paled and his eyes shot a mad glance upward.

"Pisened did you say, villain? Send yer name down hyer ef ye dare! Keno, I feel the infernal stuff in my blood now. I'm all afire. Great God! throw me into a river ov ice-water. Pisened! an' just when we've struck the trail ter Diavolo's tomb!"

In one second Captain Leopard seemed to have sprung to the threshold of death, and he would have fallen if the arms of several stalwart roughs had not seized him.

"Catch the demon up thar an' flay him!" he cried to his pards. "He's a white man, if I am pisened by an Injun arrer! Tie yer handkerchief on my neck, Keno. Tie it tight. I'd give an arm ter tear thar gold map from over thet boy's heart afore I pass in my checks!"

These words of the apparently dying desperado soared upward to the man who still occupied the spur of rock which overlooked the scene by the leaning tree.

"You're a miserable coward, captain," he remarked with a smile. "There's no more poison on that arrow than there is on my hand. You'll die by fright one of these days, bully that you are. When you an' your sweet-scented mountain shrubs get to Don Diavolo's mine let me know, will you? Good-night, Sierra tigers!"

With a farewell look downward the masked personage drew back from the rock and left Captain Leopard and his companions to themselves.

For awhile the dark-faced men waited for their leader to die a terrible death from the effects of a poisoned arrow, and Captain Leopard himself settled back in Keno Kit's arms, determined to grapple with all his strength with the grim monster.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed away, and yet the paroxysms did not come.

The arrow wound was getting sore, so that Captain Leopard shut his hands and gave vent to new curses whenever he moved his head.

"Mebbe thet man lied," suggested Keno Kit.

"Do you think so?" asked the captain, as his face suddenly brightened.

"Hang me, ef I don't. You don't feel like dyin' now, do you?"

"I never did feel that way. Tear off the rag an' look at the wound. You know how California arrer pisen works, Keno. Hold the light down, Bluffer, an' let Keno diagnose my case. Look close at the edges ov the wound. Ef you see the pisen signs, say so, Keno."

By this time the hands of Keno Kit had removed the handkerchief from the captain's throat, and he was examining the wound by the light of the torch.

Captain Leopard held his breath and waited for the verdict, and the ruffians fastened their eyes on Keno Kit.

At last the mountain surgeon raised his head and looked at his leader.

"Wal, Keno?" began the captain.

"Thar's no pisen thar," was the answer. "A babe could lick yer wound an' live."

The next moment a shout of joy rose from Captain Leopard's throat, and he caught Keno Kit's dark hand.

"I'll lead you all to the golden city, pards!" he exclaimed. "No pisen! A thousand thanks. Doctor Kenol! But woe to the man what fired thet shaft! From this spot we begin the final hunt for Don Diavolo's palace ov gold. A thousand shafts sha'n't keep me from the riches, an' no lies about pisen arrers shall ever make a fool ov Captain Leopard ag'in!"

He was on his feet now, unsupported, for Keno Kit and all bad stepped back.

"Gold! gold!" he went on, throwing his arms in mid-air. "I've spent the best ten years ov my life after the trail ov the lost bonanza, an' now thet I've struck it, all the powers thet be sha'n't keep me from the old place. For this arrer in my neck somebody will get a bullet, an' a bowie in his heart. I'm more than Captain Leopard—that's the blood ov his Satanic Majesty in my veins!"

His men might credit the last assertion, if they were to judge by his appearance, for he looked every inca a demon in human shape.

Suddenly Keno Kit touched his arm and the eyes of the two men met.

"Give me a private moment, captain," said Keno in a voice that did not seem like his own.

"Sartainly, Kit," and the desperadoes saw the two men walk away together.

Keno Kit led Captain Leopard to the shadow of a rock perhaps ten yards from the group, and then went on:

"Don't think me curious, captain, but just afore you got thet arrer, you put me on a new trail. Hang me! if you didn't say suthin' thet sent a knife through me."

Captain Leopard's first response was a strange, inquisitive look which would have become a stare if Keno Kit had not continued:

"When the youngster told you thet he war twenty-one an' thet he got thet tattoo when he war eight, you got madder than ever an' said thet eight from twenty-one left thirteen. What did you mean by thet captain?"

The leader of the gold toughs could see that Keno Kit was laboring under an excitement which he was trying to choke down.

"What did I mean, Keno?" he said. "Oh, nothin'."

Keno Kit's eyes flashed.

"Lie to the men back thar!" he said pointing toward the waiting group. "Lie to the stars above us, but not to me!"

"Keno—"

"Enough!" was the interruption. "We've been pards through blood an' battle for ten years, captain, but a lie parts us to-night forever!"

Captain Leopard recoiled, but suddenly started forward.

"Keno!—Keno!" he shouted, but there was no response.

Keno Kit was gone!

Captain Leopard occupied the spot for a minute, during which time he appeared strangely mystified, then he turned suddenly on his heel and went back to his men.

"Pards ov the Sierra, for the first time in the history ov our league, it contains a deserter," he said to the crowd. "Keno Kit has turned his back upon us forever. Kill him on sight!"

Before the astonished ruffians could respond, a wild laugh came from the direction taken by Keno Kit.

It was full of fearlessness and contempt, and all knew that it came from the new deserter's throat.

"Wait for me, coward!" roared Captain Leopard springing forward.

"No, captain. Doctor yer throat an' find the big bonanza, ha! ha! ha!"

Captain Leopard went back to his men.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TATTOOED CHART AGAIN.

The morning that broke over Steeltrap City after California Claude's never-to-be-forgotten visit fetched back a person whose appearance caused no little excitement and speculation.

This individual was Fearless Frank, who had made his way from the spot where he had almost lost his chart and his life at one and the same time under the knife of Captain Leopard.

The youth knew nothing of Claude's terrible deeds in Flush Phil's place, and he hurried to the cabin where he had left Queen Bess bound and gagged.

Of course the boss beauty of Steeltrap was not there to be rescued, and Frank threw himself upon the cot whose soft skins invited repose, for he needed rest after the exciting trials through which he had passed.

"I ought to curse the day and the hand that gave me this terrible tattoo!" he suddenly exclaimed. "It may have been my father's hand. If so, why did he send me out into the world to be hunted for a piece of my skin by the worst lot of desperadoes that ever cursed the land of gold? I have thought of late years that my tattoo might be a chart of the lost mines, but I never expected to bother my head about them. I am content to be what I am—a citizen of Steeltrap City with Bess for my companion, and happy with her, and in the possession of wealth enough to supply all my wants. Now, this tattoo which I suppose I must carry through life, imperils my existence and dashes the cup of happiness to the ground. I have become Frank the hunted. Ten thousand gold-fiends throughout California want my indelible chart."

He stopped suddenly, and tore open his shirt to feast his eyes on the tattoo mark.

"I wish I could tear it out or obliterate it forever!" he exclaimed. "I wish fortune would direct me to an herb that would blot it out. I am to be hunted down for it like an Indian, or like a sneaking wolf is hunted from cave to cave, or from trail to trail. But they will have to fight for it! Yes, they will have a time getting my tattooed map. I will defend it to the end, for it is life to me."

His eyes flashed as the last words fell from his lips, and he sprung up and went to the door as if the presence of an eavesdropper had been detected.

With his left hand he opened the door, while his right clutched a cocked revolver.

But no face greeted him, only the soft morning sunlight that streamed into the cabin, and he stood where he halted and drank it in.

"I'm back in Steeltrap, but there's no telling how long I will be permitted to stay here unmolested," he went on. "I am glad that Bess is at liberty, but I trust she did not attempt to follow Captain Leopard. There's not an ounce of cowardly blood in her veins. She—"

He saw at that moment a sight that held him spellbound.

A crowd of men had suddenly appeared in sight, citizens of Steeltrap, every one, but this was not all.

Fearless Frank's keen eyes at once saw that several men were borne along like corpses on rough pine biers, and a second look brought an exclamation to his lips.

"Somebody's been killed in Steeltrap!" he cried, and the next moment he stepped from the cabin and waited for the strange procession to come up.

At sight of him the Steeltrappers almost baled, and exchanged meanful looks.

"Shoot me! ef the boy bezn't come back!" exclaimed Bonita Ben. "Look hyer, pards, say nothin' ter excite him. Arter we've planted the boys, we'll investigate."

"Investigate what, Bonita?" asked a man near the stalwart S'celtrapper.

"Wait an' see," was the answer.

By this time the head of the gang had reached a spot opposite the youth's cabin, and a stride carried him to Bonita Ben's side.

"Who did all this, Bonita?" was his question.

"The only hound who could do it an' git away," was the quick reply.

"California Claude!"

"Thet's the demon. He came hyer last night, stalked inter Flush Phil's, whar we all war, an' killed seven men in five seconds."

Fearless Frank uttered an ejaculation of amazement.

"And did he actually get away?" he cried.

"Didn't I say he did? Tharl don't ask me why we let him off, but it war because he cowed us all. But his escape isn't ther worst feature in the case. Queen Bess went along as his pard."

Fearless Frank fell back, his face suddenly becoming as ashen as that of a corpse.

"As that mountain devil's pard? Never?" he cried.

"Thet's about the size ov it on the face ov the returns," said Bonita Ben coolly, looking down into the youth's eyes. "I didn't tell you this to turn you write. It scooped my racket, for ray

wildest dreams never pictured Bess as California's pard."

"She never will be that!"

"All right! I'm glad you think so," smiled Bonita Ben, as his hand fell on the young man's shoulder. "Look hyer, Fearless. My advice is: never bank too much on a woman's constancy. She won't do ter tie to. I've been thar, thank 'ee. Ez a chromo they'll do ter look at—women, I mean, Fearless—but you can't depend on 'em. I came nigh thinkin' Bess an exception to the rule, but she's no better than the rest."

Bonita Ben saw the eyes of the listener flash under his rough estimate of Queen Bess's constancy.

"Don't argue the case, now," cried an impatient voice from the midst of the crowd. "We've got the dead ter plant an' the livin' ter hunt down an' kill. Proceed with the funeral, Bonita!" And Fearless Frank found himself encroached on by the crowd of roughs.

With a look at Bonita, but with no reply to his last remarks, he stepped back, and watched the crowd resume its tramp to the little cemetery which would have had no existence if the love of gold had not founded Steeltrap City among the mountains.

"What! Bess false, and California Claude's companion! It is a lie!" cried the youth. "Bonita has misjudged her. There is no treason in her heart for Steeltrap, much less for me. She may have gone off with the Curse of the Placers, but she has never united her fortunes with his! She is too loyal for that. Why, but the other night she forced him to swear at the rifle's muzzle to leave the Gold Range forever. And now they tell me that she has become his pard. It is infamous! I will listen to such charges no more. I will be her champion in Steeltrap City, and I will not let one of its citizens, no, not the whole crowd combined, traduce her in my presence!"

Fearless Frank went back to his cabin; why, he hardly knew.

The events of the last few moments had set his brain in a whirl, and he needed time for calmness and reflection.

He wanted proof of Bonita Ben's terrible assertions.

What could he say to sustain his charges?

He had said that Queen Bess had turned her back on Steeltrap, but how did he know it?

"He will seek me after the burial," said Fearless Frank, "and I will make him prove his charges or retract them. But while I wait for him I will get ready for a hunt that promises to be exciting. I am going to find Queen Bess! Even with the tattooed gold chart on my bosom, I am going among the mountain trails after her. Captain Leopard and his oath shall not keep me back. If I meet the person who sent the arrow through the gold demon's neck at the right moment, I'll thank him, and perhaps I should thank the captain for letting his bowie drop into my hand. Thanks, captain, thanks!" and Fearless Frank laughed as he set to work cleaning his revolvers and looking carefully at the locks of a repeating rifle.

He was deeply engaged on his task when the door opened, and the next moment Bonita Ben presented himself on the inside.

The youth in a glance showed that the visit was not an unpleasant one to him, although the head man of Steeltrap found him in no very good way to enforce any demands; his weapons had just been oiled and were unloaded.

Bonita Ben said nothing until he had shut the door, and then, with an eager stride, he placed himself within two feet of Frank, and let his big brown hand fall like a trip-hammer upon his shoulder:

"I've come hyer for a purpose that interests me mightily," he said, showing the youth by his eyes that his purpose was a dark one. "I've turned investigator, Fearless, an' I don't want you to deny me the right ter satisfy my curiosity. I want ter know if I've been sleepin' for ten years at the door ov Don Diavolo's gold paradise. Open yer shirt-front an' show me yer heart's cover!"

Although the speaker's sentences must have prepared the young gold-miner in a measure for what was coming, he started at the cool command.

It seemed to breathe of new peril, new dangers, and new excitement.

"Don't play with Bonita Ben," the Steeltrapper went on sternly, and his fingers seemed to sink into the youth's shoulder like the talons of an eagle. "You've seen enough of me to know what I am. Play a fair game with me—no cold deck—or, by Jerusalem! Bess shall be lost to you forever! Come, show up, Fearless!"

The next second Fearless Frank broke from the grasp of the rough, and as he leaped up he tore his shirt open and showed the tattoo.

"Here it is!" he cried. "Fix it in your mind. Engrave the accursed thing on your brain! I wish you could relieve me of every infernal line and figure!"

Bonita Ben looked, but could not speak.

CHAPTER XIII.

TRUSTED TOO FAR.

The tableau presented in the miner's cabin was a singular and striking one.

Bonita Ben leaned toward the young miner and fixed his eyes starefully on the chart.

He held his breath, but did not utter a word.

"This is the gold key," Fearless Frank went on, as if the silence was painful to him. "It is true that I am a living trail to Don Diavolo's golden city. Photograph it on your mind, Bonita Ben, for it is liable to disappear suddenly and forever!"

The last words seemed to start the stalwart tough into life.

"Whar ar' ye goin'?" he cried, clutching Frank's arm as if he were about to leave the cabin.

"Did I say I was going anywhere?" was the answer. "Look at the tattoo till you've got your fill of it. I am told that ten thousand men want it, and I class you among them. Are you done?"

"I've seen enough of it for the present," said Bonita Ben.

"Good. Now talk to me. How do you know that Bess went off with California Claude?"

"By the boss-tracks that keep up with him. She rode Flying Star away, an' I guess I know his hoof-marks."

Fearless Frank seemed confounded.

"Do you want to see for yourself, boy?" asked the gold-hunter.

"No."

"You ar' satisfied, then?"

"If you saw Flying Star's tracks, I ought to know."

"Wal, I did."

"But you haven't convinced me that Bess went willingly with that man."

"Maybe I can't do that, Fearless; but I'll bet my teeth that you would find 'em together this mornin', an' she is no prisoner, either."

"Then, you still accuse her of treachery—of willingly becoming California Claude's pard?"

"It looks that way."

"I have said that I would stand no such accusations against Bess!" flashed the young miner. "I have lived ten years in Steeltrap, and in all that time I have had no words with any man."

"An' I must say that you guarded your secret well," flung out the big gold-hunter. "Queer that I didn't suspect ye till lately."

Fearless Frank smiled faintly.

"Didn't Bess know it?"

"Not until within the last few hours."

"Wal, it scoops my racket. What did Captain an' his pards do ter ye?"

"Drew a drop of blood."

"Didn't they want the tattoo?"

"Yes."

"An' didn't take it?"

"Haven't you just seen that I am still its owner?"

"But a copy, I mean."

"They wanted the original, the fools!" laughed Frank. "It was a sorry capture for Captain Leopard."

"Why?"

"He got an arrow in his neck."

"Who put it thar?"

"I don't know."

"Whar did it come from?"

"From some point overhead."

"It scoops my racket. War it an Injun shaft?"

"It looked like one."

"With a black-feathered tail!"

"Yes."

Fearless Frank thought he saw Bonita Ben give a slight start.

"Did you ever think that that arrer might have been fired at you?" suddenly asked the gold-hunter.

"No; but I know it hit the man it was aimed at."

"Ef you know it, that settles it." was the retort; but I've got an idea still. Now, we'll go back to first principles. You say that the tattoo over yer heart means the golden grave ov Don Diavolo an' his Injun wife?"

"I believe it does."

"An' you've carried it thar for years without tryin' ter find the big bonanza?"

"I have."

"I've got no racket at all now; it's clean crushed. Yer action seems incredible!"

"Nevertheless, I am willing to swear that I speak the truth," and up went the young miner's hand. "There have been times when I felt the need of money, but not for all California would I possess myself of the lost gold city. This tattoo of mine has caused me trouble enough, and on account of it, to-day, I am a hunted man—hunted by a pack of human wolves who have actually sworn to tear it from me with their bowies. I wish I could give it to you, Bonita Ben."

The man's eyes fairly glistened.

"I wish I could take it—by Jerusalem, I do!" he cried. "See byar; you ought ter hav pards just now. Ef ever a man needed friends, you need 'em at this stage ov the game; yet, I don't trust that map ter ther eyes ov my pards in Steeltrap. Show 'em that tattoo an' they'd all go howlin' mad within twenty-four hours. But I've got a scheme; you must leave Steeltrap tonight—now!"

"I'm willing to do that. I have promised myself to hunt Bess up, and California Claude and others down."

"We'll find 'em afore long, but for the present you must put yourself under my keer."

"To what extent?" asked Fearless Frank.

"Time an' circumstances will determine that. If you start out on the hunt ov Bess alone, you might find an unexpected obstacle in the trail."

The gold-miner understood—the "unexpected obstacle" was Bonita Ben himself.

He made no reply, but looked into the ruffian's face.

"Obey me, an' in due time you shall see Bess. Hesitate or go back on me, an' all Steeltrap will draw their bowies ter cut that tattoo out. They'd fight like wolves for your carkiss, even when they don't know how ter explain the lines an' figgers."

The young miner could hardly repress a smile.

"The prospect ahead is not inviting; I admit that," he said. "But I would rather go ahead for myself, and take things as they come. I am not afraid of Captain Leopard and his gold pards, but am eager to fight them whenever they choose time and ground. It will be a bloody day when they get the map I carry over my heart."

"Talk's cheap, young man. You go with me now."

"Whither?"

"I'll show you. Whar's yer boss?"

"In the corral, if he hasn't been taken away since I left Steeltrap."

"We've hed no thieves hyer durin' yer absence. Wal, take yer boss an' go down to the mouth of the Jim Dandy mine. Wait for me thar."

"When will you come?"

"Within forty minutes. I've got ter do some tall lyin' first."

Fearless Frank looked as if he wanted to ask for an explanation of the last sentence, but without another word Bonita Ben left the cabin.

"I'll obey that man," Frank said to himself; "but I will watch him. I will meet him at the Jim Dandy mine, but I will be ready to stamp out treachery."

He fell to work on the weapons again, and ten minutes later, armed with rifle and revolver, he was walking toward the corral where he expected to find his horse.

He threw several keen glances over his shoulder, but saw no suspicious eyes regarding him.

What had become of Bonita Ben?

At that moment the big citizen of Steeltrap was the central figure of a dark-faced crowd in Flush Phil's den, and all were listening to him.

"I thought we hed the gold-key foul when I told him ter haul open his shirt, but when I saw his white skin without a mark on it I war sold. Somebody else besides Fearless Frank carries the precious chart over his heart, an' we've got ter look elsewhere for 'im, pards. Captain Leopard carried 'im off, expectin' ter find the prize just whar I looked for it, an' the captain got sold, too."

The crowd looked astonished and disappointed.

It was evident from the demeanor of some that Bonita Ben was suspected of not sticking entirely to the truth, and this feeling was likely to gain ground, since it was known that he had the reputation of being a first-class liar.

But he so solemnly averred that there was no tattoo-mark on Fearless Frank's bosom that a few of the doubting ones gave him credit for telling the truth.

After his report, Bonita Ben invited the crowd to drink at his expense, an invitation which it is unnecessary to say was promptly accepted, and while the Steeltrappers were satisfying their thirst for mountain whisky, he embraced the first opportunity to steal from the place.

Saddling a horse at the corral he rode away, and just beyond the outskirts of the mining-camp, he found Fearless Frank quietly awaiting him.

"Wal, if I didn't pull the fleece over Steeltrap's optics, shoot me for a rattle!" he laughed as he joined the young man. "I bad the hull set drinkin' my report down with open eyes an' gapin' mouths. They'd swear, Fearless, that thar's no sign ov a tattoo on yer body."

"So much for Steeltrap; but you couldn't hoodwink Captain Leopard and pards so easily, Bonita," smiled the youth.

"Mebbe not, mebbe not," was the answer. "Give me a Steeltrapper for a gull. I kin lie with the least effort ov any man I ever heard ov."

"I certify to that, Bonita," said Frank. "I've listened to you on state occasions."

Instead of taking offense at these remarks, Bonita Ben broke into a boisterous laugh, and leaning toward the young gold-miner patted him good-naturedly on the shoulder.

"We're off now," he suddenly exclaimed, and the next second he caught Frank's bridle-rein and spoke to his own horse.

Away went both animals at an easy gait which increased and continued for two hours, at the end of which time Bonita Ben halted and looked into the youth's face.

"Do you know where you are, Fearless?" he asked, his eyes twinkling under the smile that played over his swardly face.

Fearless Frank took in his surroundings with a swift glance.

"I am among the Riven Rocks," he said.

"Ye'r' nowhar else," said Bonita Ben. "Dismount."

The youth obeyed and the next second much to his surprise the Steeltrapper lifted a heavy network of vines that concealed a part of a mountain wall of rock and also the mouth of a cave.

"Go forward," he continued, addressing Frank, but the young miner instinctively hesitated.

"I thought you war ter obey me."

"I more than half promised to, but—"

"No hesitation hyer!"

The hand of Fearless Frank moved toward the revolver ready for use at a moment's warning but the man from Steeltrap anticipated the movement, and proved too much for him.

Quick as a flash he threw himself from his horse and fell upon the youth with the force of a descending thunderbolt.

Fearless Frank had trusted the desperado too far!

When Bonita Ben entered the cavern, he carried the insensible figure of the youth in his arms, and shot through clinched teeth these words:

"We'll see who gets the tattoo, Captain Leopard!"

Ten hours later, or just after dark, a man entered Steeltrap and accosted a Mexicanish looking individual who lay on a dirty cot in the corner of a cabin.

"Didn't you once tell me, Juez, that you could tattoo?" he asked.

"Yes, Señor Bonita."

"Then foller me. I've got a job for you; but remember that it's death if you ever blow it."

The Mexican grinned and got up.

CHAPTER XIV.

GREEK MEETS GREEK.

"Oh, I'm worth a dozen dead men yet. Thar war a time when I thought that arrer hed finished me, an' I waited fer Keno's diagnosis with a good deal ov impatience; but the moment he told me the shaft hadn't cut through a vital region, I knew I war all bunkt. What! Captain Leopard goin' ter pass in his checks this side ov Don Diavolo's gold? Wal, I reckon not!" and the speaker supplemented the last sentence with a boisterous laugh.

Captain Leopard was alone, and astride of an elegant black horse almost as well known as his merciless master.

It was the second night after his wounding by the mysterious arrow from above the spot where he had almost robbed Fearless Frank of the tattooed chart on his bosom.

He was miles from the leaning tree, but on ground familiar to him; for there were few trails among the Sierras that Captain Leopard did not know.

Still determined to reach the wonderful place for which thousands had hunted, fought and bled!

Fearless Frank had miraculously escaped from his clutches, and he had an ugly but, fortunately for him, not dangerous wound in the neck which he kept hidden beneath a handkerchief.

Captain Leopard rode slowly down the mountain-trail whose side walls, rough and festooned in many places with wild vines which here and there bore bunches of singular flowers, rose for several hundred feet above him.

He had left his band somewhere, had probably sent them away on some promising trail, while he was carrying out a project of his own.

Suddenly the gold-trailer of the Sierra drew rein, and quick as a flash laid his hand on a revolver which was always ready.

"Hello, thar, cap'n!" called out a voice in clear accents, and the next moment there rode into full view a man who sat his steed like a Bedouin prince.

For half a minute Captain Leopard leaned forward, and studied the speaker with mingled curiosity and suspicion.

The two men were not twenty yards apart, and the laced hat of the one contrasted strikingly with the broken and bandless sombrero of the other.

"Friend or foe, California Claude?" asked Captain Leopard without advancing a foot.

"Make it what it shall be, cap'n," was the answer in a devil-may-care manner. "Two galoots ov our ilk oughtn't to be foes with the bull Gold Range for our play-ground. We've never interfered with one another yet. Shall we begin now?"

"I guess not, California," and throwing back the brim of his hat with an upward sweep of his bronzed hand Captain Leopard rode forward.

They met for the first time face to face, those two desperate men of the gold region with their great object in life one and the same—the gaining of the traditional gold-mine whose exact locality the full years of a century had kept a profound secret.

There must have flashed across the mind of

each at the same moment a consciousness that though they met as friends, they might part as deadly enemies.

There was a smile on California Claude's fine face in response to the lowering look that came from under Captain Leopard's arching brows as he came forward.

All at once Claude thrust out his right hand for a shake, but the captain of the thirteen pards seemed to shrink from its touch.

"Just as you like, cap'n," said Claude coolly. "I thought you said it war not as enemies, but suit yerself; not as I care."

California Claude was taking his hand back when Captain Leopard put his forward.

"I mean what I've said," he exclaimed. "Pardon me, California. Hyer's Leopard's handle," and their hands touched midway between the two horses.

It was not a hearty shake, hardly better than a mere touch, and in it each seemed to suspicion the other.

When the hands separated the two desperados straightened in their saddles, and eyed each other from head to foot like two gladiators who expect to engage ere long.

They seemed at a loss where to begin conversation, and the fleeting seconds were fast making the encounter ridiculous.

"How's business?" suddenly asked Claude the Pitiless.

"Pretty brisk, but wealth keeps her distance," was the reply.

"Not struck the gold-trail, eh?"

Captain Leopard started.

There must have flashed across his mind at that instant Fearless Frank's assertion under the knife that this very California Claude possessed a chart like the one worn by the boy.

"Wal, I'm not thar just now," he said, showing his teeth to the Placer Curse with a grin.

"We all want it," said Claude. "Captain Leopard, we're not the only fools in California; thar ar' nine thousand nine hundred an' ninety eight just like us. Somebody's got ter fail. Shall it be us?"

Captain Leopard's eyes were seen to flash.

"I have sworn that I will not!" he cried. "I've got thar every time so far, California."

"But this is an extraordinary bunt."

"I know it."

"It's a hunt a century old, an', after all, we may be chasin' a will-o-the-wisp—a lie thet flies from us as we chase it."

"Think so ef you want ter, but let me keep an opinion ov my own."

"I sha'n't interfere with it," said Claude. "But look hyer, cap'n, I'm goin' ter turn questioner, but I sha'n't ask you one about Don Diavolo's bonanza. Whar's ther boy?"

The captain of the gold pards started visibly and looked into the questioner's eyes.

"Do you mean Fearless Frank?" he said.

"Yes. You swooped down on Steeltrap t'other night an' carried him off. Is he your prisoner now?"

"You shall be answered fairly, California. I hevn't got the youngster."

"He got away, eh?"

"Yes."

The recollection of the young miner's escape brought the captain's lips madly together behind the brief reply.

"Before you—"

California Claude broke his own sentence, as if he had suddenly discovered that he was trespassing on forbidden territory.

"Why don't you proceed?" laughed Captain Leopard. "If you will not, I will. Yes, the boy got away before I was through with him."

"You hadn't hurt him, cap'n?"

"No."

"I guess thet's all."

Captain Leopard gave the Curse of the Placers a singular look.

He had terminated the interview so abruptly, and in a manner entirely unlooked for, that he (the captain) was nonplused.

Claude, the Pitiless, then, was interested in Fearless Frank; he knew that he carried the mysterious tattoo on his bosom, and, after all, perhaps, he (California Claude) did not possess a duplicate key to Don Diavolo's bonanza!

"Curse you, I'll find out before mornin'!" said Leopard to himself. "We both ar' bound for the lost gold palace, but both of us will not get thar. One shall leave his bones for the mountain vultures this side ov the threshold. An' I'll see that they are not my bones. Ar' you lookin' for the boy, California?"

"Not particular," was the careless answer to the question, which had been spoken aloud. "I'm somewhat interested in the young gold galoot, but not in the way you seem ter be. I don't want him for what he wears. I understand you do."

These last words took the captain completely aback; he recoiled like a man suddenly confronted by a startling truth which he did not want out.

"I—I—what's thet, California?" he exclaimed.

Claude Cothard laughed at the consternation he had caused.

"Come, cap'n; let's understand one another thoroughly," he said, continuing the laugh. "I remarked that you want the boy for what he

wears, not on his back, but over his heart. I don't want him for that. I wouldn't give a Mexican dollar for what I already possess."

California Claude's eyes said quite as much as his lips did, and the last sentence seemed to give him unbounded pleasure.

It was a boast which he shot fairly into Captain Leopard's teeth, and the bolt went home from the recoil in the saddle just before him.

It took the map-hunter a full second to recover.

"If you've got it, you're a devilish lucky man," he said. "I heard the other night thar war a duplicate chart, but I didn't more'n half b'lieve it. It war told under the p'int ov a bowie, an' you know thet secrets divulged thar ar' apt to be lies."

"Did the youngster say so?"

"Perhaps."

Captain Leopard seemed to have gone back to caution in an instant.

"I'm happy ter inform you, cap'n, thet Fearless Frank didn't lie thet time," said California Claude. "What I hevn't particularly sought, hez fallen into my hands, an' what you've hunted for for ten years slips through your fingers. Strange an' provokin', isn't it?"

Captain Leopard flushed suddenly to the temples, and it was with difficulty that he kept himself from flying across the little space between the steeds at Claude's throat!

His hands shut madly, and his nails sunk under the skin and drew his own blood.

"The duplicate chart is within arm's reach ov me!" he muttered. "He isn't lyin', not a whit ov it, as I kin see by his eyes," and he choked his madness down.

"It's a dangerous keepsake in this kentry, Claude," he went on trying to smile. "By George! ef I hed it, I wouldn't blow it from trail to trail, but I'd get down ter solid business."

California Claude broke into a loud laugh which made the wild region ring, and irritated the listener till he bit his lips.

"What's the durned thing worth when you can't study it out?" he exclaimed. "Ten thousand men are huntin' thet chart an' they don't stop to think thar it's a mass ov lines, dots an' figures, with a few instructions in half-faded Spanish or Injun lingo."

"Give me a chance at it an' by Jerusalem! ef I don't walk straight to the bonanza you kin hev my head!" said the captain, eagerly. "I dare any man to put thet puzzle in my hands!"

"I'll give it another trial, cap'n, an' if I fail I'll hang it up somehow along this trail for the next gold-fool."

California Claude took up the lines as he finished, and seeing that he was about to go, Captain Leopard instinctively moved aside to give him the trail.

"I've got the chart but I'm no richer than you ar' to-night, cap'n," he went on addressing the man who was eying him like a hawk. "I could whisper in your ear thet I've won another prize worth ez much to me as that gold mine. Ov course I'd like ter hev it, too. an' ef brains ar' worth anything I'll get to thar bed rock ov the mystery."

"So will I!" almost thundered Captain Leopard, as he rose suddenly in his broad stirrups and raised his right hand. "I'll git thar, California Claude! I'm the winnin' man ov the ten thousand. You've got one chart. I'll get the other, an' then may the best set ov brains win!"

"All right!" almost laughed the Placer Curse, and his black eyes twinkled fearlessly. "We've sat face ter face for the first time, cap'n, but if you're bound ter git thar we ar' likely ter collide ag'in!"

"I promise you a collision!" was the instant retort. "Both ov us can't reach Don Diavolo's gold alive!"

"No, one must die this side ov the treasure."

"Mebbe both, eh?"

"No; only one."

"Then I swear that it sha'n't be Captain Leopard!"

"An' I swear that the dead one shall not be California Claude!"

The last oath died away without an echo, and the two desperadoes presented a strange tableau as they sat in their saddles face to face with scarcely twenty feet between them.

All at once California Claude started forward again.

"Good-night, cap'n," he said, doffing his laced sombrero with mock courtesy. "I am happy thet I've hed the pleasure ov yer acquaintance. Ef we ever cross bowies durin' our hunt fer Don Diavolo's bonanza I'll treat you to the cleanest blade in the Gold Range. Once more, my golden chick, good-night!"

Before Captain Leopard could respond to the parting, the outlaw's horse, pricked with silver spurs, bounded away, and with his rider was lost to sight almost before a pistol could have been drawn.

"The coolest man I've got to meet," said Captain Leopard, "but in spite ov him even I'll git thar."

"Not while he carries the chart in his pocket. Why didn't you blow his head off?"

Captain Leopard looked and saw a misspeller.

being in his path, and instantly clutched a revolver.

"I've got the drop, captain. Draw, an' die! Please come down from that saddle!"

The captain of the thirteen recoiled, but he could not escape.

He was at the mercy of Crooked Tom, the gold-bunting dwarf, and behind the revolver that covered him were two little eyes that fairly snapped.

"Down! quick! or I'll empty the saddle!" continued the dwarf, in tones not to be misinterpreted. "I'm shootin' for the lost bonanza nowadays. Down, captain!"

Seeing that it would be death to disobey, Captain Leopard sullenly slid to the ground.

"Throw your revolvers against the wall!" was the next command, and one which was obeyed with an inward oath.

"Get them when I am gone, ba! ba!" and while the triumphant laugh still sounded, the dwarf sprung nimbly into the seat just vacated and Captain Leopard had the displeasure of seeing his horse carrying the imp away!

Crooked Tom was galloping over the ground just traveled by California Claude, and in the same direction taken by the outlaw, and the captain had to nurse his wrath alone.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN.

WAITING for some one who had evidently promised to meet her, reclined Queen Bess, the beauty of Steeltrap City, on a cot of skins near the entrance to a cavern in the mountain-side not a great distance from the scene of the encounter between Captain Leopard and Claude the Pitiless.

The reader already knows that the girl left Steeltrap with California Claude shortly after his mad adventures with the miners in Flush Phil's place.

She had followed him thence with the expectation of discovering the fate of Fearless Frank, whom she had seen captured by the gold-pards of the Sierra under the leadership of the redoubtable Leopard himself.

We have but to say that, as yet, she had learned nothing satisfactory, and now in the mountain cavern she was waiting for Claude, who had gone out to strike, if possible, a trail that would furnish a clew.

It was shortly after the hour that witnessed the meeting detailed in the foregoing chapter, and Bess of Steeltrap City was growing impatient over the outlaw's absence.

More than once she had gone to the trail that ran in front of the cave, but her visits to the spot had produced no satisfactory results.

California Claude did not come.

"What if he finds Frank?" suddenly exclaimed the girl. "He told me that Captain Leopard should never possess the chart that he carries over his heart, but two days have elapsed since that infamous dog swooped down upon Steeltrap and left me bound in the cabin while he ran off with his prize. I know you for a sleek villain, Claude the Pitiless—one whose companion I have become merely for the purpose of assisting Frank. You want the gold cave yourself; I know that, and you will stoop to any villainy to keep others from it. But lift your band against Fearless Frank if you dare, California Claude!—if you dare, I say!"

By the time she had finished the last sentence, Bess was at the outside entrance to the cave once more, and her pause was rendered abrupt by the somewhat startling sound that came to her ears from far down the mountain trail.

"A horse!" she exclaimed. "It must be California, and he is riding hard, too."

On came the steed as yet unseen, and carrying, as the girl well knew, a rider who was not attempting to slacken his gait.

Suddenly the Queen of Steeltrap drew back beyond the shadowed threshold of the retreat and waited there.

It was a beautiful night: the moon at her full sailed serenely through the cloudless heavens outlining every rock and tree, and casting their shadows in grotesque confusion athwart the silvery trail.

A strange spell seemed to hold the beautiful girl to the spot while she listened to the rapid approach of the steed which surely knew every foot of the mountain way.

"I wonder what news he brings?" the girl asked herself. "If bad, woe to you, Captain Leopard! If Frank has escaped and is free, we will see that your red hands touch him no more."

The mountains were full of echoes, so that the resonant crags sent the noise of hoofs far in advance of the horse which to Bess seemed an ago in coming in sight.

"Ah! he is here at last!" and the girl sprung from the cave and bailed in front of a horse which had stopped there, planting his fore feet in the earth, and panting like a jaded racer at the end of the course.

She saw a man in the saddle—a man who had long black hair, and was headless, yet she knew him as California Claude for whom she had waited.

But why was there no greeting for her?—why did he lean forward with one hand gripping the

bridle and the other buried clutchingly in the black steed's mane?

What had happened to Claude the Pitiless?

Bess of Steeltrap darted to the horse's side.

"Well, you are back!" she exclaimed. "What news have you fetched me?"

The words seemed to start the rider into life, and all at once he fell from the saddle and came down with a sickening thud at Queen Bess's feet.

Back from the spot recoiled the Queen of Steeltrap with a terrible cry:

"My God! California Claude is dead!"

Dead?

No; the spasmodic movement on the part of the man who had just struck the ground told Bess that she had judged too soon.

The next instant she was stooping over Claude the Pitiless.

"Curse that mountain ape!" grated the outlaw. "He cuts his way to a prize when he wants it. Look at my jacket, Bess." And a bloody hand opened the mentioned garment, which the girl saw with dilated eyes was cut here and there as if the knife had been wielded in some deadly encounter.

"The mountain ape, you say?" she began.

"Ah! yes; I know him now—Crooked Tom."

"Eldorado's pard!" said Claude. "He, too, is on the gold-trail. I met Captain Leopard an' we had a few words in the trail—"

"And Frank?" interrupted the girl, with eagerness.

"He gave the galoot the slip, an' still carries the gold-map where it has always been."

"Thank Heaven!"

California Claude said nothing for a moment, but ground his teeth.

"The captain an' I didn't come ter blows, but might ef I hed stayed," he went on. "Wal, I rode off an' it warn't long afore I heard a boss behind me. 'Captain Leopard,' said I, an' I slacked up ter give him a chance ter win the gold-chart which I told him I carried. But all at once the sounds stopped ez ef the boss had stopped himself and I went on."

The outlaw paused for a moment and looked up into the girl's face.

"Now comes the bateful part ov the yarn," he said. "Now comes the part that riles me. I war ridin' slowly on with news for you, Bess, when something fell upon me from over-head, an' the first thing I knew a hand was at my throat, and a knife war cuttin' me all ter pieces. It war that infernal man-monkey, Eldorado's pard, an' the last thing I war lookin' for thar. Resist? My God! girl, before I could draw, the bull thang war over, the mountain devil war gone, an' I war lyin' on the ground under my horse's feet, cut into strips an' my chart gone! Won't thar be a day ov reckonin' fer that spawn ov perdition?" and the Californian clinched his hands. "Won't be wish before long that he had never fooled with the map the ten thousand want? Wal, I'm back to you, Bess, not ez whole ez when I went away, but a livin' demon for all that. Somehow or other the ape's bowie didn't find my heart, but it warn't because he didn't want ter put it thar. I guess I'll go inside."

California Claude made an effort to rise and enter the cavern, but quickly discovered that loss of blood had rendered him unequal to the task, and the beauty of Steeltrap came to his assistance.

The horse stood quietly by and watched his master disappear beyond the threshold of the cavern, then moved forward and began to crop the long rich grass which grew along the lofty wall of the pass.

Claude's dark eyes flashed like mad stars behind the cheeks rendered white by the knife of the dwarf gold-demon.

Bess believed that theirs was an unnatural light, and wondered if the days of the Placer Scourge were not near their ending.

In the light of the torch which illuminated the cave, California Claude opened his jacket and made an examination of his wounds.

The girl saw him wash the blood from them with a coolness that won her admiration, and her keen eyes saw the four cuts that threatened his life.

Crooked Tom had evidently struck wildly, and while the obtaining of the gold-map was uppermost in his mind.

If he had guided the knife with his eye and thrown a little more strength into the blows, Claude the Pitiless might not have been able to examine his hurts in the mountain retreat.

As it was, there was a good chance for the outlaw of the Sierras, and a day of dismay if not of death for the man-monkey who had fallen to kill.

Bess helped to make the desperado comfortable.

He had cheered her with good news, and she bore him no ill-will, despite the fact that he had told her that he would make her his queen and the mistress of Don Diavolo's gold.

"I will risk that," she had said to herself. "I will never be your queen, California Claude, and the lost gold city will not own me for its mistress."

While she watched the pale-faced desperado who was slowly sinking to sleep from exhaustion

on the cot, her thoughts recurred to the one friend for whom she had left Steeltrap and for the present united her fortunes to those of a mountain bandit.

Fearless Frank had not been robbed of his precious chart by the bowie of Captain Leopard.

On the contrary, he had effected his escape and gone—whither?

Back to Steeltrap?

Queen Bess started at this mental question.

"Heaven keep him from Steeltrap at this time!" she ejaculated. "They suspect the truth—that he wears the gold-key on his breast. Let not Bonita Ben discover it. If he does, Frank will be no safer in Steeltrap than in Captain Leopard's clutches."

Fifteen minutes later the girl bent over California Claude and for several moments watched him closely in his slumbers.

He was not feigning sleep, but his rest was deep, almost lethargic in its character.

"Why not?" said the girl to herself. "Why not go back to Steeltrap? I am not bound to this man any longer. The fight for the gold-map has fairly begun, and where Frank is whether in danger or not there is my post."

The resolve was made ere she rose from her watching, and with a farewell glance at the exhausted sport she stole toward the mouth of the cave.

She knew that it was a long and dangerous journey back to the miners' camp among the gold-bills, but she counted every peril, weighed every danger, and was ready to face them all.

Captain Leopard and his pards might be between her and Steeltrap, the dwarf, fiendish and vindictive, was liable to appear at any moment in her way; but Queen Bess was not to be daunted by thoughts of these foes.

"Back to Steeltrap!" she exclaimed, moving down the corridor of the cavern to the trail. "In this battle for your tattoo, Frank, you shall not be without an ally!"

It was a resolve worthy the courage of the beautiful being from whose lips the words dropped ringing with bravery, and she stepped out into the moonlight eager for the contest.

The horse which had carried her at California's side to the cavern if where the outlaw had stabled him was not far away, and the search that Bess instituted for him was successful.

"Now, Flying Star, take me to the new battle field," she said to the steed that recognized his young mistress with a joyful nicker. "A lot of bronze men crowned me Queen of Steeltrap once, and I will show them if need be that I have not abdicated."

In another moment Bess was in the saddle, and had turned her steed's head toward Steeltrap City when he uttered a startling sound and recoiled.

"Another horse!" exclaimed the girl at sight of an equine head thrust forward as if in greeting to her own steed. "It must be California's horse. No; the hue of this steed is white and—My God!"

Well might this startling exclamation ring from the girl's throat and cause her to reel from the saddle!

The white horse before her had a rider, but heaven! what a terrible one!

It was a human body naked to the waist, and headless, and a large spot over the heart was a bleeding mass of flesh!

All at once a terrible thought flashed across Queen Bess's mind.

"Merciful heavens! it is Frank!" And she struck the ground in a swoon.

CHAPTER XVI.

QUEEN BESS'S COMPLIMENTS.

The mountain shadows had changed their resting-places when the Girl Queen of Steeltrap City opened her eyes and saw, not in reality, but in vivid imagination, the terrible apparition which had hurled her into unconsciousness.

She found herself the only occupant of the spot, but at sound of her voice her horse came up, showing that the phantom had not frightened him entirely away.

Bess stood undecided on the trail for some time.

Should she go back and acquaint California Claude with her adventures? or, should she resume her flight to the miners' capital?

"Why go back to Steeltrap now?" she asked herself. "I have said that my post is where Frank is and God knows he is not there. Whose work is this!—whose but Captain Leopard's? He may have told Claude, the Pitiless, that Frank escaped; but he boldly lied. I saw his work awhile ago. He was not content with taking the tattooed chart, but he must take the head also. There is for this diabolical deed, Captain Leopard, a day of reckoning which shall make you wish you had never seen the blushes of morning! I know nothing but vengeance now. I leave Steeltrap behind me forever. I will follow the headless horseman, and when I have given him decent burial, I will turn on the mountain wolves who killed and mangled him."

The girl did not mount until a close in-

spection of the trail she thought she had discovered the tracks of the white horse.

They did not lead toward Steeltrap, but in the contrary direction, and Bess set off at a rapid pace hoping to overtake the steed and his rider.

She could not tell just how much time had elapsed between her swooning and recovery, but the shadows of rock and tree told her that the headless rider could not be very far ahead of her.

If she could have looked several miles in advance she might have seen the object of her search toiling up a narrow trail which seemed ambitious to reach the stars far above the lofty peak of a mountain.

It was the same white steed that had carried into her presence the ghastly rider whose dead hands were lashed to the bridle-rein, and whose stiffened limbs were secured to the saddle by pieces of a dark-colored lasso.

There was no humbug about the phantom.

The body was inclined slightly forward, but not too much to prevent any one from seeing that the left breast had been mutilated, and that beyond the raw edges were singular dark lines, and here and there some tattooed figures!

What more was wanting to tell those interested in the tattooed chart that the mutilated rider was Fearless Frank of Steeltrap City, the unfortunate youth whose doom had been worked by the mysterious tattooing on his breast?

The winds blew against the white skin of the apparition, and now and then overhanging boughs touched the headless trunk, but the horse kept on, carrying his burden up toward the glittering stars, as if among them he expected to be relieved of it.

When he reached the highest altitude of the trail he paused for a moment and then began the descent.

Down, down he kept his way, the headless corpse keeping the saddle only by the thongs that held the limbs against its skirts.

It was a ride that would have sent a shiver to the heart of the most undaunted spectator.

Suddenly there rung out, clear and stern on the bracing night air, a single word:

"Halt!"

Of course the ghastly rider moved not, but the steed pricked his fox-like ears and kept on.

"Halt, thar!" said the voice again, and there in the trail, on a strong-limbed bay, sat a man whose proportions were almost gigantic, and who held forward, at the ends of outstretched arms clad in buckskin, two huge revolvers ready cocked.

"I'll blow you ter Kingdom Come," continued the giant. "I'm not ther chap ter stand a bit ov foolin'. You're approachin' dangerous ground, pard. Halt! hands up er diel!"

Still the commands, which, from the tones in which they were spoken, evidently meant business, were not obeyed, and the desperado, instead of firing, lowered his weapons half an inch and looked nonplussed.

"Who the devil is it, anyhow?" he said, curiously, to himself. "Mebbe the galoot's asleep. Ef he is, hang me ef I don't give him a stirrin' up he'll never forget!"

He put up one revolver and leaned forward as he waited for the horse to come up.

The white steed was coming on in a walk which did not take him rapidly over the ground, and the man in buckskin awaited him with much impatience.

There was but little moonshine on this particular trail, but here and there was a spot, notably one that nipped the nose of the bay steed.

"Asleep he is, by Jericho!" exclaimed the desperado. "I'll fetch him up standin'. Hyer wear', old pard. Devil's Gulch! Change cars for—Jehosaphat! thunder an' Hades! Headless! by Jerusalem!"

The last exclamations rung from the throat of the man who reeled in his saddle, and almost pitched backward and headlong to the ground.

"Let me out ov this, Greaser! Jebu! what a traveler! I'll warn the camp, an' post 'em fer ther infernal visit it ever had!"

He wheeled about like a man suddenly bereft of reason, as indeed he seemed to be, and the next moment the bay horse went down the trail, his course marked by the fire that his hoofs struck on the flinty stones that crooked out here and there!

There wasn't a particle of color in the man's face; he looked as though he had confronted, if not touched, a being from the nether world.

"Put wind inter yer legs, Greaser," he cried to his horse. "Mebbe the devilish thing is chasin' us like mad. I'd sooner lose an arm than look back! Thunder an' guns! I'm scared out ov five years' growth, an' my blood still runs cold through my body. Wait till that thing rides inter camp! Won't that be a time among the boys? Wonder if it's goin' ter haunt the mountains from now on? If we've got ter luck ag'in such a thing in our tussle for Don Diavolo's bonanza, just count this galoot out from to-night."

Meanwhile the bay horse was taking his frightened rider swiftly down the trail, while the headless horseman was quietly pursuing his

course along the same rough road, bearing his burden surely toward the camp which could not be far away.

Suddenly and almost without warning the white-faced mountaineer burst into a camp in a pass, and right into the midst of a group of men who were listening to a man who was striking in appearance, and whose neck was encircled with a red handkerchief.

"Look out!" he exclaimed. "The most terrible thing you ever saw is comin' inter camp. Thar! don't draw yer revolvers for cold lead can't kill it. I saw it! I actually touched it an' it's colder than ice. What is it? A man what hez no head! a ghost lashed to the saddle—death on his pale horse!"

The man's demeanor and appearance were enough to make the dark-faced listeners stare at him agast, and more than one revolver sunk from suddenly unnerved hands back into their leatheren cases.

"Tell the truth—we want that, Bluffer," sternly said the man with the red kerchief about his neck. "You look like you've seen a legion ov ghosts."

"One's enough for this California chick, cap'n," was the answer. "Ef you wait five minutes you'll see for yourselves. . . . Keep yer eyes down yonder;" and Bluffer's hand, shaking like an aspen, pointed back over the trail he had traveled like a flash. "Curse me, if I want another sight ov the thing; so you'll excuse me, cap'n, ef I ride on."

"No; you stay with us. Captain Leopard will meet the visitor with a full hand."

"All right, then; but you'll let me get out ov its way, won't you?" growled Bluffer.

"Yes. We'll all vacate the trail for it—six on one side an' seven on the other. Now, not a movement without the word from me. I'm running this boat still, an' ef I did meet California Claude ter-night an' war robbed ov my boss by that man-ape, Crooked Tom, I'm goin' ter be first at the mouth ov ther gold-grave ov Don Diavolo."

In less than a minute the mountain pards had separated as Captain Leopard had commanded, and without a word and hardly a breath they waited for the headless horseman, their bodies pressed against the wal's of the gulch, and their dark hands at the butts of their revolvers.

Five—ten minutes passed away.

"Thar!" suddenly ejaculated Bluffer in a whisper to the man on his right. "He's on deck. Look sharp an' see the devil er his agent."

The sound of hoofs was now heard distinctly by every desperado, and every eye was strained to catch sight of the phantom that had frightened Bluffer.

Slowly the horse came in sight, and all at once a number of wild exclamations rent the air.

"Keep yer places!" sternly said Captain Leopard. "What's one dead man ter thirteen livin' tigers?"

The men did keep their stations, but as the white horse and his terrible rider reached the only spot of moonlight in the gulch and showed themselves plainly to the assembled thirteen, there was almost a panic.

The weird light rendered the spectacle more ghastly than it otherwise would have been, and it was strong enough to show the gold-fiends every striking feature about it—the bleeding trunk, the tied limbs, and the bloody mane and sides of the white horse.

"I'll inspect him," said Captain Leopard striding forward. "No man, dead or alive, passes through Camp Diavolo unchallenged."

Three strides carried him to the white steed and his hand clutched the bridle as he said:

"Halt!"

As if tired and ready to stop the steed obeyed the command, and Captain Leopard put his hand on the phantom's arm.

"Heigho, thar, pard!" he called out. "You've got ter Camp Diavolo an' we want ter know suthin' about yer. Hold up yer-head? No! by Jerusalem! you've got none; but hello! what's that over yer heart?"

Captain Leopard leaned nearer to the headless rider, and uttered a startling cry.

"Euchered, by Jebu!" he exclaimed. "This man is Fearless Frank an' his key to the gold-bonanza is gone! Keep yer places, men, an' let the dead ride on. I'm all broke up!"

Captain Leopard's hand had already left the rein and he went back to his post white-faced.

"By George! cap'n, hyer comes another hoss!" suddenly exclaimed one of the gold-pards.

The leader of the thirteen started forward at the announcement.

"I'll start the ghost ahead," he said and the white horse bounded forward from under the hand that alighted on his flank.

Three minutes later another horse appeared between the two lines of mountain desperadoes, and Captain Leopard with a cry of "the Queen ov Steeltrap!" sprung out and stopped it with a hand at the bit.

"Have I found you so soon?" cried the person in the saddle as a revolver was thrust into the gold-hunter's face.

"I'm Captain Leopard."

"Then, take this with my compliments," and from the pistol's flash the captain staggered toward the gulch wall with a wild yell!

CHAPTER XVII.

HUNTING THE HEADLESS.

THE shot seemed to paralyze the Sierra wolves, and their leader had sunk at the foot of the wall before one dashed forward to avenge the shot.

"Back, men of gold!" cried the girl whose eyes flashed madly above the smoking revolver which she presented to them with steady nerves. "I am only avenging the devilish deeds of your leader's bowie! Halt where you are, or I will not spare a single life!"

There was something in Bess's demeanor that had a magical effect on the swarthy twelve, for not a hand clutched her steed's rein, and no one presented himself in the trail to prevent her departure.

"Let the girl go, I say," said Bluffer. "We kin corral her when we want her."

"Look at the cap'n yonder," growled another.

"Yes, look at him and stand back," said the girl. "Tell me what you did with his head?"

"Whose head?" several voices at once.

"Why ask me such a question when you know?"

"If you mean the boy's—"

"I mean Fearless Frank's. Where is it?"

"The cap'n didn't take it." Queen Bess looked thunderstruck.

"No lies," she said sternly.

"We'll give you none," said Bluffer advancing a stride from the wall. "Before heaven, girl, Captain Leopard did not rob that youngster ov his head. He turned white as a corpse himself when he saw that headless thing enter camp—"

"It came here, then?" interrupted the girl.

"Yes, not ten minutes ago."

The Queen of Steeltrap threw a glance toward the man lying with stareful eyes at the foot of the wall a few feet away.

"You'd better move on," said Bluffer. "We'll corral you some time fer yer shot in Camp Diavolo. You'd have no show hyer ef we took a notion ter open on yer. Ov course you might tumble a few, fer you've got ther drop on us collectively; but when we got through with you, you'd be a sieve that wouldn't hold sand. Don't think, my Californy daisy, that we ar' goin' ter let Cap'n Leopard sleep unavenged. You kin ride ter ther coast ef you want ter, but some day a bullet, er a lasso, will find yer thar."

"I accept the challenge!" cried the girl. "If I have killed a man who didn't send Fearless Frank adrift among the mountains without a head, I've shot one who would not have hesitated to do it."

"That may be, queen, but he didn't do it. Move on, or by the blazin' stars! I'll not attempt ter keep back these furious pards, but will let ther hull pack onto you."

The girl's answer was a fearless smile, and as she lifted the bridle-rein Bluffer stepped back a foot.

"Go an' jine the headless horseman," he said; "but don't forget that Cap'n Leopard's pards owe you one for yer bloody shot."

He concluded in a manner which indicated his aversion to a further continuation of the conversation, and Queen Bess moved forward between the two lines of bloodthirsty demons.

The instant she disappeared, a howl of rage and disappointment soared skyward, and Bluffer was instantly surrounded by a swearing mob.

"Why did you let her slide? We had our hands on our droppers. She couldn't hav killed more than one, ef that, an' yet you let her go, Bluffer."

"Policy, policy," replied the desperado. "Kill her now an' lose forever the key ter Don Diavolo's bonanza. Don't I believe that she's got a copy ov Fearless Frank's gold-chart somewhere? Is it likely that he wouldn't trust her with the secret when they war pards? Foller her, trail her, an' we'll find the gold mine yet. Kill her now, an' probably lose it forever!"

These adroit words had their effect; the listeners cooled down, and went to their leader, who apparently had not moved since he fell against the gulch wall from the flash of Queen Bess's pistol.

As for the girl herself, she had urged her steed into a gallop, and was riding fast over the trail in hopes of overtaking the terrible rider of the white horse.

She still carried a revolver in her right hand, as if she expected to be suddenly confronted by some mountain enemy, but none stepped into the trail to order her hands up, or to question her mission.

The main trail was narrow, but quite easily kept, so that Bess confidently expected to overtake the white steed and his rider within a short time.

But she was doomed to disappointment.

Nearly ten miles from the gulch camp the drew rein, and gave vent to her thoughts in audible language.

She had not overtaken the headless rider,

although she had galloped several miles at almost break-neck speed.

She could only conclude, as she summed the whole matter up, that the white horse had wandered off among the by-trails, carrying his silent and ghostly burden deeper than ever into the wilderness of the Sierra.

"Shall I go back and hunt him?" she asked herself. "I have passed fifty different trails that branch off from this one, and I may have to travel forty-nine unsuccessfully. I have sworn to find him, and see that he is not carried among these hated hills until the flesh drops from his bones. I want to relieve the white horse of his terrible rider, and, after that, I want to pay with the interest that vengeance gives, all who were concerned in the theft of his life. They told me that Captain Leopard did not commit the deed. Can I believe this? This corresponds with what California Claude told me—that Frank escaped from his persecutors. I will know all one of these days."

Queen Bess had drawn rein in a somewhat open and picturesque part of the Sierra, where the mountains were not so high, and where the grass was green and velvety, with here and there spots where tiny yellow flowers diversified the sward.

Suddenly her eye caught sight of something that was not a flower.

It bad life and motion, and as she watched it she saw it creep almost panther-like toward her from a point quite remote.

"It is a man," she said as she watched the crawler with a great deal of curiosity. "He does not see me, and yet he appears to be avoiding some one or something I cannot see."

The girl hastened to guide her horse from the middle of the trail, and among some mountain bushes she made him lie down while she dismounted and prepared to keep an eye on the man.

There was something about that crawl from shadow to shadow, and from rock to rock, that claimed the girl's attention.

In some mysterious manner it seemed to connect itself with the horseman riding headless among the mountains.

Who was he trying to avoid?

The Queen of Steeltrap could not see.

Revolver in hand she waited for the man, for step by step he was coming toward her station, not in a straight line of course, but surely toward it all the same.

"Juez, the Mexican of Steeltrap City!" suddenly parted the girl's lips.

Yes, the crawler had been recognized as the man whom Bonita Ben, two nights before as the reader will recollect, took from Steeltrap to perform a job which should never come to the ken of mortals.

"What brings Juez to this part of the country? Ah! I will find out," murmured Bess. "He looks as if he had seen the headless horseman. I have him now."

A moment later the faultless figure of the Queen of Steeltrap rose over the bushes, and the next second she stepped into the trail.

But ten feet separated her from the man who leaped to his feet.

"I have you, Juez! Not a cry, not a movement, or I will send a bullet crashing through your skull!"

The yellow creeper thus taken unawares, instinctively threw up his hands, and then sent a frightened look over his shoulder.

"Dios! don't shoot me," he exclaimed. "I will leave this horrid land forever. I will go back to Mexico. Santissima! why did I ever learn to tattoo?"

"What's that?" cried the girl. "Who have you tattooed? Speak the truth, Juez—tell me all, and woe to the man who touches you for it!"

Queen Bess's right hand encircled the Mexican's arm; she was all excitement.

"Tell, me! tell me, Juez!" she went on.

"By heavens! he never shall!"

These words were followed by the crack of a rifle, and without a cry, without a gasp, Juez the tattooer of Steeltrap dropped dead at the girl's feet!

Queen Bess recoiled with a wild exclamation. She had lost some terrible secret.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT BAY IN STEELTRAP.

THE man who had fired the death shot from a secluded spot fifty yards away turned on his heel as the Mexican struck the ground, and walked off with a smile of intense triumph and satisfaction at the corners of his mouth.

It was Bonita Ben, the lost desperado into whose hands Fearless Frank had fallen.

"I guess he won't tell her anything now," he remarked, throwing a glance over his shoulder at Queen Bess, who still stood speechless over the dead tattooer. "If I haven't shut that galoot's mou' forever, set me down for a idiot. When he tells you anything, my Steeltrap saph, just let me know, will you?"

As he turned a bend in the trail, Bonita Ben cast one more look backward, and saw the Queen of the Sierra bending over the motionless

form of Juez who would never speak again, for Bonita seldom had to shoot twice at the same human target.

"Ply 'im with questions!" he laughed. "You're welcome ter all ther satisfaction you git out ov him, Bess. Thar's a spectacle on hossback somewhar among ther mountains that'll startle you when you come across it. Oh, I struck the trail ter ther big bonanza and ter night I gird up my loins fer ther race ter it. I've eucherred all Steeltrap, an' I've got ther secret they want. They kin stay behind an' settle with California Claude in the manner that suits 'em best, I don't care. I go to ther lost gold city. Arter awhile it'll be Bonanza Ben the Gold Rajah ov California, er suthin' ter that effect."

Several hours later Bonita Ben reappeared in Steeltrap and walking unconcernedly into Flush Phil's ordered a drink.

The proprietor of the trap who at that moment happened to be behind the bar himself stared curiously at his customer for a moment and then placed bottle and glass before him.

It was early morning, and the den was entirely deserted when Bonita Ben made his appearance.

"You warn't hyer last night?" asked Flush Phil.

"No; what happened?—anything?"

"Yes. The boys held a little confab, an' agreed ter set up a job on several obnoxious persons."

Bonita Ben opened his eyes enough to indicate interest and surprise.

"That means California Claude for one, I suppose," he remarked.

"Yes, an' you for another."

Flush Phil delivered this very important information in a low tone of voice, and by leaning over the counter.

"Me!" ejaculated Bonita Ben. "What hav I done ter Steeltrap?"

"They say that you lied t'other night when you told them that war no mark on Fearless Frank's bosom. They say, too, that the boy went off with you, an' that you afterwards came back an' took Inez off."

Calm now, and desperado-like, the Steeltrapper heard these accusations with the utmost nonchalance imaginable.

He saw that he had come back to Steeltrap at a very inopportune time, but, since he was back, he intended to "face the music" in a manner that might not please the musicians.

"They say that ov me, do they?" he said, when Flush Phil had had time to breathe after imparting the startling information.

"They said it boldly, too, an' in a way that meant bizness; but for Heaven's sake don't give me away."

"I won't."

"I never go back on my patrons an' you've been my best, Bonita; therefore, I deem it my duty ter warn yer."

"Thanks, Phil. I'll take another on the strength ov it," and Bonita proceeded to fill another glass, which he drained, and deposited a gold dollar on the counter, saying: "No change, Phil."

Flush Phil, it might have been noticed, kept a weather eye on the front door as if he feared that it would open suddenly and admit certain parties whom he did not want for visitors just at that time.

"When do they expect ter put up that job on me?" asked Bonita Ben.

"At the first opportunity."

"Ter-night ef I stay hyer?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. I wouldn't advise you to stay, Bonita, unless—"

"What?" interrupted Juez's killer, his black eyes showing flashes of fire in their depths.

"Unless you ar' prepared fer ther hull blamed set, er kin prove that ye didn't lie."

"Mebbe that's good advice," laughed Bonita Ben, "an' ther takin' ov it depends on sircumstances. I'm back in Steeltrap whar I belong, an' curse the galoots that accuse me ov lyin'. Kin they prove that I lied?"

"They say they kin."

"How?"

"I don't know. Mebbe they expect ter git suthin' out ov Juez."

Bonita Ben smiled strangely.

"Thet man will never tell them anything," he said, significantly. "They might question him till doomsday. Want me, eh? Got a job put up on Bonita Ben? Wal, I'll show 'em that, ez a citizen ov Steeltrap, I'm able ter hold my own!"

The burly schemer turned toward the door as he shot forth his defiance, and inserting his thumbs under his armpits struck an insulting and defiant attitude.

"I didn't come hyer fer a picnic, but I'll not shun one," he went on. "When I go out ov these diggin's ag'in' my will, it'll be feet foremost bound fer ther silent camp under ther hill whar men never quarrel. I'm a daisy from Daisy City, a reg'lar rattler when men tread on my tail. I'd give a pound ov dust ter see that door open an' admit ther galoots ov Steeltrap."

The last sentence had scarcely reached its conclusion when several human voices came

into the place, and Flush Phil leaned over the counter and clutched Bonita's shoulder.

"They're comin' now, er a part ov 'em," he said, in frightened accents.

"All right! I'm ready ter photograph their doom in cold lead." And the bronze hand of Bonita Ben moved toward a revolver. "Just keep yer hand out ov the muss, Phil, an' you'll see one ov ther all-firedest, bloodiest picnics Steeltrap ever had. I'll discount the entertainment California Claude gave hyer t'other night—if they tell me to my teeth that I lied about Fearless Frank."

"Don't meet 'em hyer," pleaded Flush Phil, clinging to the mad rough's shoulder. "I don't want my place turned ag'in inter a slaughterhouse. Once is enough. Don't let 'em see you hyer now. I've got a place for you whar you kin hear all their confab, an' get some valuable information besides."

Bonita Ben threw a disdainful glance at Flush Phil, but did not stir.

"It's a bully place," continued the proprietor of the den. "Do me a favor, Bonita; don't meet the boys hyer this mornin'."

"All right. Whar's yer retreat?"

"Come this way."

Bonita Ben's sudden change elated Flush Phil, and the next moment he was leading him around the counter to a narrow door in the board wall at the end of the bar shelves.

"Quick! git in hyer an' wait an' listen, but for Heaven's sake make no disturbance," he said, as he opened the door, and almost pushed the desperado across the threshold. "They've come up from the mines for a drink; and they won't stay long. That's a pin-hole just above the latch." And the door shut, leaving Bonita Ben in the blackness of darkness.

"I'm a durned fool, runnin' from men afore I've seen 'em!" he grated, in no good humor. "By George! I'll not play the coward in this manner! Whar's that latch?"

He turned to the door with an overpowering desire to force his way into the saloon and face the men who might be the bitt' rest foes he ever had, although until within the last few hours he might have called them friends.

After a minute's groping his fingers struck the latch, but he discovered that it would not yield.

"Fastened in!" he hissed. "I could break yer bottles over yer head fer this, Flush Phil!"

At that moment the front door of the trap was thrown violently open, and there trooped in two dozen dark-shirted, stalwart, wild-looking men whose skin bore the grime and dust of the mine.

Bonita Ben found the "pin-hole" just above the latch as they entered the place, and an ejaculation dropped from his tongue as he recognized the mob.

"They're reg'lar tigers, arter blood or whisky," he said to himself. "Time will tell which ov the two they'll get."

The whole party came up to the bar behind which Flush Phil was trying to appear calm and innocent, and as with one voice demanded drinks.

"What's yer choice, boys?" asked the liquor-dealer.

"We'll take the same kind Bonita Ben took last," was the response. "Set out his bottle, Phil, an' then whisper in our ears whar we'd be likely ter find the lyin' galoot."

Flush Phil shot a lightning glance toward the door in the wall, as if he expected to see it burst open by the demon caged beyond it.

He knew it would be of no use to deny that Bonita Ben had entered the place that morning, therefore he put on the best face he could assume, and solemnly averred without blushing, that Bonita had left the saloon a few moments before, and ended by suggesting that he might be found at his cabin.

"Gone, eh?" said half a dozen voices. "Through ther front door?"

"Yes."

"Then he must have ther faculty ov dissolvin' inter air, that's all. Look hyer, Phil; we don't intend ter dispute yer word, but that door hez been watched ever since Bonita Ben crossed ther step. Arkansaw an' Stonefist yonder ar' ther watchers, an' they'll say that Bonita Ben didn't leave by that door."

Flush Phil saw that he was caught in a very transparent falsehood, but, believing that a lie well stuck to was the best thing under the circumstances, he reiterated that Bonita Ben had left the place and hinted rather vaguely at dereliction of duty by the two spies.

But his words wouldn't go down; the men were bent on mischief.

"We've got ter make a beginnin'," said the leader of the set—tall, long-haired and as dark almost as a Sioux warrior. "The gold bonanza ov Don Diavolo is the stake we're playin' for now. We've left the mines ov Steeltrap forever; that's only one mine ter us from now on. Bonita Ben lied t'other night when he said that Fearless Frank hed no tattooed map on his bosom. He saw it an' carried it off, boy an' all. Now he's somewhat on these premises, an' by the eternall we ar' willin' ter begin our fight fer ther bonanza hyer! He didn't go out ther door. You heard us hyer last night, an' you've posted

Bonita, expectin' a divvy when he goes thor. Now give us ther full truth, Philip, my whisky scrap, er we'll introduce yer brains to the bottles that decapitate yer shelves!"

Flush Phil recoiled with a cry of consternation, for all at once a dozen revolvers had leaped over the top of the counter, and he was looking into their ominous muzzles or staring over their gleaming barrels into the merciless eyes of the pards of Steeltrap.

"Whar's Steeltrap's boss liar?" was the mad demand they made. "Answer kerrectly within three seconds, Flush Philip, er take up yer residence in the silent camp under the bill!"

Under such circumstances, a man like the bartender of Steeltrap was liable to betray his best friend.

"I'll tell the truth," he said. "A man always likes ter stand by those who hev been his best customers, you know. Bonita Ben did come hyer awhile ago, but he didn't leave by the front door."

"We knowed that all the time, Phil!"

"He's been my friend, I say—"

"Let up on that business!" was the interruption by the impatient man-hunters. "Show us whar Bonita is. That's what we're hyer for."

Flush Phil turned toward the door at his left, but before he could take a step in that direction or indicate the desperado's hiding-place—crash! it flew open, and the pards of Steeltrap reeled.

"I answer yer question in person!" exclaimed the man, who planted himself firmly on the prostrate and shattered door and thrust two cocked revolvers into the faces of the astonished pards. "Men ov Steeltrap, you want Bonita Ben, an' he is hyer! State yer case an' proceed ter bizness. If I lied t'other night, it war because I wanted ter! Hands down, er toes up! Take yer choice!"

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW THE "PUT UP JOB" FAILED.

THERE was a desperate coolness about Bonita Ben that made the astonished pards of Steeltrap, in obedience to his command, keep their hands and weapons at their sides.

"You war sayin' awhile ago that I've lied," continued the man on the door. "Do you know that Fearless Frank carries the gold-key on his breast?"

"We suspect that he does," answered the Indianified leader of the tough gang.

"Suspect, eh? Is that all?" sneered Ben. "State yer grounds."

There was no response.

Bonita Ben seemed to have kicked the supports from under the men he faced.

"Oh, git out, then," he cried. "You saw me come hyer an' sollered me ter deal the hand you set up last night. I am a citizen ov Steeltrap, but hyer I sw'ar away all allegiance ter ther place I leave it now perhaps for good. Duty may fetch me back some day, I don't know when. Flush Phil, traitor though you ar', set 'em up for the wolves ov the old camp an' charge it ter Bonita Ben. Now, gentlemen, I'll rid you ov my obnoxious presence. Keep yer hands down three minutes, please, or I may open with my batteries."

He stepped from the door and came around the end of the counter, still keeping his revolvers level with the Steeltrappers' breasts.

They knew that a hostile movement would be a signal for death, and wisely kept their hands down.

With the air of a conqueror, Bonita Ben skirted the edge of the crowd and moved toward the door which the last man to enter had left open.

He did not take his eyes from the twenty-four pards for a single second, and it is safe to say that not one of them failed to eye him with the ferocity of tigers.

This was the man against whom they had in solemn conclave "put up a job," and now he was getting away from twenty-four of them.

Not only this, but he was carrying off with him a secret which every man in Steeltrap wanted solved.

Bonita Ben reached the door of the saloon and with one foot over the threshold broke out into a derisive laugh.

"I guess ther cold deck b'longs ter me, eh, Steeltrappers!" he exclaimed. "On ther lookout fer Don Diavolo's gold-mine, too, I see! Wal, don't look fer it down my pistols, er by Jerusalem! you may find suthin' else."

The last word died away with its threatening echo in the hearts of the speechless listeners, the second foot followed its mate, and Bonita Ben was gone!

Gone! and they had failed to corral him and his secret!

For one brief moment one might have heard a pin drop on the floor of Flush Phil's den.

The twenty-four discomfited pards stared at the open door as if they expected to see the coolest man in Steeltrap enter there.

"Gone he is!" suddenly growled their leader. "We'll accept his treat first, an' then we'll show him who's goin' ter be custodian ov that secret. Hyer, Phil, set 'em out."

The crowd with one accord turned to the bar, on which they saw several capacious bottles

and the whole outfit of Flush Phil's whisky glasses.

But Phil himself had disappeared.

"Not bad policy," observed the long-haired leader, with a grim smile. "He tried ter shield Bonita Ben, an' ten chances ter one that he gave our session away slick an' clean. We'll help ourselves, pard, an' drink to our success on the gold trail."

The scene that followed almost baffles description.

For five minutes Flush Phil's bottles furnished refreshments for the thirsty throats of the Steeltrappers, and amid their hilarity they, for the moment, forgot the man who had walked past their revolvers escaping with his life.

Flush Phil had quietly set out bottles and glasses during Bonita Ben's march to the door, and then slipped from the place, knowing that in all likelihood he would be called to account for harboring the man the two dozen wanted.

He could afford to leave his saloon to the tender mercies of the toughs of Steeltrap rather than himself, and deeming discretion the better part of valor, he had quietly taken his departure.

The toughs were not destructive with the furniture of the place, though it may be said that they might not have dealt so gently with the owner. They broke a few glasses and threw only one bottle through the greasy mirror that reflected Flush Phil's stock in trade, then, with a yell that meant a great deal, they rushed from the den, some with less steady gait than when they entered.

They went straight toward the cabin which had served as Bonita Ben's home for a number of years.

Their actions indicated that they did not expect to find the proprietor "at home," for they marched up to the very door, and Comanche Jim, the leader, kicked it open without a particle of respect or ceremony.

A bowl of rage told that the shanty was empty, and the head of the mob broke up its scanty furniture in a few minutes.

"Now the match!" cried several loud voices. "Let us show Bonita Ben that it's war ter the knife. Ez we burn his shanty, so we burn our bridges behind us, an' with a whoop an' a hooray, strikeout for Don Diavolo's gold!"

This proposition was received with yells of approval from the least sober members of the band, and in less than no time, to use a common expression, smoke was curling above Bonita Ben's home.

A rather brisk wind was blowing toward the southern quarter of Steeltrap and as the volume of flame increased, it threatened more than the one cabin with destruction.

"What means this?" suddenly asked a voice at Comanche Jim's side.

The dark-faced ruffian turned and started when he looked down into Queen Bess's face.

"Whar did you come from?" he exclaimed.

"No difference. Tell me what has happened in Steeltrap."

There was the authority to command in the girl's voice.

Before Bonita could reply she was surrounded by the entire crowd, some of whom eyed her with a great deal of suspicion and anger, but she never flinched under the scrutiny.

"That cabin belongs to Bonita Ben," she went on. "You men have applied a match to it and it is doomed to destruction. Tell me what it means."

"Wal, we failed ter corral the skunk what owns it an' we hed ter git even somewhar along the line," growled Comanche.

"Has he been here?"

"Bet yer life, Queen. An' he took his secret off with him."

Did the men of Steeltrap see the girl start?

What secret?

The mental question was enough to send a thrill to her heart.

"To what secret do you refer?" she said as she touched Comanche's arm.

"Thar's only one worth huntin' for these times," was the quick reply. "You ought ter know about ez much about it ez we do, seein' that you an' ther youngster's been pards for ten years. Bonita got onter it also. He carried Fearless off with him t'other night—"

Queen Bess interrupted the speaker with a strange ejaculation.

"News ter you, eh, Bess?" laughed Comanche.

"Yes."

"Wal, ez I war sayin', he took Fearless off the night arter we hed planted the pards shot by California Claude at Flush Phil's. We wanted ter know whar he took Fearless, an' what he did to him. The boy carried a map on his breast, didn't he?"

Why deny it now after the terrible sight she had seen among the mountains?

"Yes," the girl answered almost unconsciously. "My God! you have given me the terrible secret I have been hunting! I don't know where Bonita Ben took Fearless Frank; but I do know what he did to him."

"Wal?"

The crowd contracted its circle, and almost trampled the girl in their eagerness.

Queen Bess stood in the center of the gang speechless, and without a bit of color, but with flashing eyes.

"So be is the bebeader, is he? Oh, Heaven, why did I reach Steeltrap a moment too late?" pealed from her throat.

The men exchanged startled glances.

"What do you call him?" cried Comanche Jim. "What's that word you used just now? Spit it out ag'in, an' then explain."

"No!" answered Queen Bess, "the work of the arch fiend of California speaks for itself! Yonder comes the white horse and his rider. My God! when did a steed ever carry such a horrible load?"

Her finger was pointing down the main street of the mountain "city," and the men who turned to follow it saw a white horse slowly advancing.

The object in the saddle had the semblance of the human form, but something most essential to shape was conspicuously lacking.

"Don't you see?" exclaimed Queen Bess clutching Comanche's arm. "It is the body of Fearless Frank; but it has no head!"

Just at that moment all the toughs seemed to take in the situation, and wild exclamations rent the air.

"You men must help me give him decent burial," said the girl sternly. "After that I will take vengeance in my own hands. The man who committed that crime shall have no funeral. The vultures of California shall clean his bones! I will stop that horse."

With the last words, full of fearless resolution, Queen Bess sprung from among the crowd, and the toughs of Steeltrap saw her seize the bridle-rein.

"Come forward," she said to them.

They obeyed.

Comanche Jim looked once, and then pinched the man at his side.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TRAIL TO GOLD AND DEATH.

JUST two weeks to the very night that witnessed Bonita Ben's encounter with, and escape from, the pards of Steeltrap in Flush Phil's place, a man came forth from what seemed to be a cleft in the stone wall of a rough mountain pass and drew a piece of paper from under his jacket.

Leaning against the canyon wall, but not until he had scrutinized his surroundings, he proceeded to study the paper carefully as if it were of the utmost importance.

The spot was far from Steeltrap, in a wild country which the foot of the adventuresome gold-hunter had not explored to any great extent.

It was deep in the heart of the Sierra, and the roughness of the solitary man's surroundings was not very suggestive of the precious metal.

If he was watched his keen eyes had failed to discover this fact, but at that very moment eyes keener than his were upon him, for he was not the only person who had penetrated that wild region.

"I seem ter hit ther trail for awhile an' then I git all wrong ag'in," he said in audible tones, perplexed over the paper which contained many zig-zag lines, figures and crosses, and a few words in Spanish. "I wonder if Don Diavolo's boanza isn't a hoax after all? If it turns out ter be such, hang me ef I don't put a world between me an' Californy! Mile after mile I've traveled, guided, as I thought, by this map, an' now I stand hyer with the infernal puzzle almost ez deep ez when I first took it up."

Who was the man? does the reader ask?

Not Captain Leopard of the thirteen gold-fields, not California Claude, nor Crooked Tom, the dwarf gold-hunter.

It was our old acquaintance Eldorado Eph, the man who was wont to boast of his poverty, who has repeatedly sworn that he would not accept the Golden State as a gift.

What has passed over the Californian's dream?

When did he turn gold-hunter and add himself to the number of men who were willing to risk their lives in the exciting race to Don Diavolo's gold mine?

"It's all a durned hoax an' I'm one ov the fools!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Eldorado, you'd better butt yer brains out ef ye lev any left ag'in' the canyon wall. Two weeks ago ye war proclaimin' with a loud voice that you hated everything yaller; you cussed the dwarf because he loved gold an' hung out yer banner ov boastful poverty wharever ye could! Now, you stand hyer like a fool, huntin' for that boanza za that recedes as ye advance. Go back ter Steeltrap an' die!"

The next second Eldorado Eph crushed the "gold-map" in his hands, and his eyes flushed lightnings of rage upon it.

"That map war on a boy's breast once, or one like it," he went on, gazing at the precious document. "It got him his everlasting end, for somebody who wanted it sent him headless on a white horse through the mountains round about Steeltrap, until at last he rode right inter camp an' Queen Bess buried him. I'd like ter know what's become ov the girl. She took a tremendous oath ov vengeance ag'in' the band that

served Fearless Frank the awful trick. Half ov Steeltrap wanted ter go with her, they say, not that they wanted ter avenge the boy, but they seemed ter know suthin', but she said "no," an' rode off alone leavin' 'em all behind. Toet's ther latest I've heard from the seat ov war. When that paper accidentally fell inter my hands, I made up my mind ter see what it meant, an' when I happened ter git what I thought war a clew, I went off like a rocket. But hyer I am, ez poor ez ever, an' ez likely ter remain so ef I depend on ther findin' ov Don Diavolo's bonanza ter enrich me. Yer' still ther Lazarus ov the Sierra, Eldorado, a distinction ov which you war once proud."

Suddenly the speaker unfolded the paper he had crushed, and a moment later it lay at his feet, torn into small pieces, and trampled under his dusty boots.

"Thet's ther way ter get rid ov temptation, trample it under yer feet!" he exclaimed. "I feel better now. When I turn gold-hunter ag'in an' go back on the doctrine I've always preached, I want ter be kicked cl'ar ter the coast! I've put the infernal thing from me forever! Ef I could find ther mouth ov ther lost bonanza ter-day, I'd turn my back on it an' walk off. But I would like ter see Queen Bess. I always took a fancy to that piece of beauty."

Having delivered himself to his satisfaction, Eldorado Eph cast a farewell glance at the work of his boots, and turned from the spot.

The shadows of night were beginning to fall once more, for the sun was just sinking below the western horizon, but it was still light enough to enable the keen eyes near by to see the gold-hater as he moved off.

When Eldorado turned a bend in the mountain trail the watcher approached the spot where he stood.

He was physically a giant with a black mustache covering his mouth, and above it a pair of eyes that were capable of flashing lightnings of rage and hate.

Still he was remarkably handsome, and his sombrero had a laced band, and his jacket was fantastically embroidered.

Could the reader have seen him as he advanced he would have uttered his name—California Claude!

Eldorado Eph was not the only tenant of the wild canyon whose walls towered five hundred feet above its bed; the lost bonanza had brought others to it, among them the Curse of the Placers, Claude the Pitiless.

He had had no gold-map to guide him, for as we have seen the mountain dwarf and pard of Eldorado Eph had taken it from him at the point of the bowie, but still he was there on the very ground to which the puzzle had allured Eldorado, there, perhaps, to fight for the prize sought by ten thousand men.

California Claude advanced to the spot just vacated by Eldorado.

His eyes glittered like a serpent's when it sees its prey as he stooped over the imprints of the gold-hater's boots in the earth, and began to pick out the pieces of paper among them.

It was a strange task for a man who had ruled the golden placers with bowie, revolver and lasso, the handsome bandit of the Sierra, who had repeatedly won thousands over the green-cloth tables of San Francisco; but he thought only of the prize that lay at the end of the solution of the enigma.

Piece by piece California Claude picked from the foot-prints, and after awhile he placed them together on the ground.

"Yer couldn't have given a fellow a show, I suppose," he growled, throwing a ferocious look over his shoulder as if he expected to see Eldorado standing near. "No! you had to take a righteous streak, an' crush the map inter the ground as if ye wanted ter drive it down inter China! Confound you, I've a notion ter foller you an' tear yer throat for it!"

The mountain outlaw certainly looked in the very mood to carry out his words, but he smothered his anger as best he could, and turned to the cut-up map again.

The sun disappeared altogether, and the entire canyon was in shadow.

California Claude got up at last, and with an oath spurned the pieces of paper over which he had wasted an hour.

"By Heavens! I'll find Don Diavolo's gold with my weapons!" he flashed. "They've never failed me yet, an' they never will! They're worth all the gold-maps ever made. California Claude, you're a fool!"

He went down the canon over the same ground taken by Eldorado Eph.

If a horse had carried him to the spot he did not mount any, but kept on, on foot.

After a tramp that took up ten minutes, he reached a cleft in the wall, which suggested that at some day the rock had been rent by an earthquake, for the fissure seemed to extend to the top.

"It's my nearest way up," he murmured, "an' then it's the same route Eldorado took. Mebbe I will hav ther pleasure ov chokin' that mountain pauper before dawn!"

California Claude did not hesitate, but commenced to climb the cleft.

The way was quite dark, for the short twi-

light that still revealed objects in the canyon proper, did not penetrate the narrow way.

The Placer Scourge kept one hand at the hilt of his bowie as he went upward, and his eyes and ears were on the alert.

Suddenly a very small piece of rock struck Claude the Pitiless a stinging blow on the cheek.

In an instant he became a dark statue in the mass, with face upturned, and with bowie now fully drawn.

Three seconds after the first stone smote him on the cheek another did exactly the same thing, and still another rattled past him on its way to the bottom of the cleft.

"Just as I suspected," murmured California Claude. "Somebody's comin' down the Devil's Stair."

There was at the bandit's back a singular niche formed by the displacement of a stone which had probably found its way to the canyon's bed, and Claude quickly accepted of the concealment it offered.

"Now come, my gentle an' unknown friend," he said with a smile as he sent a glance upward. "Mebbe Eldorado has changed his mind an' wants ter recover the puzzle he tore up. If it is be, I'll feel the territory that lies behind his windpipe!" And the speaker's fingers closed in anticipation of the work mapped out for them.

Little particles of rock continued to fall from above, and indicate the progress of the unknown.

California Claude had waited for many victims in his lifetime, but never with the interest and impatience that characterized the present ambush.

He counted the stranger's footsteps in his mind.

"By Jericho! he comes down like a boy," he suddenly said. "A man would loosen bigger pieces of rock, but this night creeper disturbs only the smallest particles."

At last the bandit of the Sierra seemed to feel the victim in his grasp.

"I've got the percentage ov him," he said. "I'll put up my bowie an' pay him my compliments with the best pair ov hands in Californy!"

The following moment he leaned from his niche, his eyes seeming to emit flashes of fire, and held his breath.

"Ho! ho! this is the way to the mountain of gold!" suddenly laughed a voice apparently not five feet from the desperado.

It made California Claude grate his teeth, and before the last word had ceased to sound, his hand shot forward like an arrow launched from an Indian bow.

Arrow never went straighter to its mark than did that mad bronzed hand.

A half-smothered cry escaped the throat when it struck and closed, and the next second Claude the Pitiless stood in the middle of the natural stairway holding his suddenly-acquired prize above his head with the ease of a giant, and laughing fiendishly.

"Bot'er luck than I looked for!" he exclaimed.

"I didn't expect Fortune to send you into my clutches, you infernal spawn of Tartarus! The last time I saw you, you were carvin' away at my heart, which, fortunately for me, you failed to hit. Oh, you're caught in a trap that never spares! Have you got the buckskin map you robbed me of?"

"No! no!" cried the bandit's victim, who was Crooked Tom, the dwarf.

"Whar is it?"

"Lost somewhere among the mountains."

"But what war you sayin' a minute ago about this bein' the way to the mountain ov gold?"

There was no response, but the little eyes of the dwarf shot a world of hatred into the merciless eyes that regarded him.

"Do you know what men call me?" suddenly resumed the Californian. "I'm Claude the Pitiless. I feel your devilish knife among my vitals now. It lost me more than the gold-puzzle, for while I lay on the ground, weakened by your gashes, a prize as valuable to me as Don Diavolo's bonanza slipped through my fingers. I lost Queen Bess by your strokes. She stole from me when I couldn't follow her; she went back to Steeltrap, an' there became a hantress of men! I owe all my bad fortune to you, man-monkey of the gold-bills! If this is the way to the big bonanza, as you say it is, I'll send you on your journey!"

The dwarf seemed to know what was coming from the way in which the last sentence was couched.

California Claude planted himself more firmly on the rocks as he finished, and the dwarf was suddenly elevated a few inches higher.

"Now down the Devil's Stair to Don Diavolo's wealth! ha! ha!" laughed Claude. "To-night you dissolve partnership forever with Eldorado Eph. Here we go, hunchback!"

A wild cry filled the fissure, and a body, strangely human, shot downward toward the canyon's bed, far below!

CHAPTER XXI.
FIVE FROM THIRTEEN.

"GREAT Jehu's ghost! What in thunder's name war that?"

These words were spoken by one of a group

of thirteen desperate-looking fellows who at the same moment drew rein as the echo of the hunchback's death-yell began to reverberate throughout the cleft in the canyon wall.

The last sentence was still unfinished when something struck the canyon trail with a dull thud, and quivered there for a moment ere it became completely still.

"By Jupiter! it's human!" exclaimed another, leaning forward and staring at the object on the ground.

"Human, cap'n?"

"Human! by my soul!" And the speaker sprung from the saddle and bent over the figure on the ground.

A moment later he looked up into the faces of his breathless companions.

"It's Crooked Tom," he said. "An, what is more, he didn't come down hyer ov his own account."

"That's a cold fact, Captain Leopard," smiled California Claude, who had not missed a word of all this. "Send up hyer for me, or come yerself, an' somebody will join the hunchback ag'in' their will. So you're tyer, too, eh?—you an' yer sweet-scented pard. Cap'n, you've got more lives than a cat. I know that some one put an arrow through yer neck when you war about ter rob the boy ov his tattoo mark, an' also that Queen Bess shot straight inter yer face afore the arrow wound healed. The girl's bullet grazed yer cheek-bone, an' gave ye a scar you'll carry till somebody gets the dead drop on yer, an' makes no mistake. Wal, you've found the man-monkey, but without the puzzle he captured when he cut me to pieces. He lost it somewhat among the mountains. Wouldn't you like ter find it, captain?"

Thus spoke the Curse of the Placers to himself while he stood on the spot from whence he had buried the gold-bunting dwarf to his death.

He appeared in no hurry to get away from the place, but some unseen power, on the contrary, seemed to hold him there.

"Search the man-monkey thoroughly!" suddenly said the voice of Captain Leopard from the foot of the stair. "He may have overtaken California Claude that night an' robbed him of the bonanza puzzle. One-half of you go up the wall by the fissure we passed above here, an' watch the mouth of this one. The man who threw the hunchback down here may not have left the crack."

The last command to the desperadoes was spoken in lowered tones, yet such were the acoustic properties of the "stair," that Claude the Pitiless heard every word.

A strange, relentless smile overspread his countenance.

"You should command by gestures, captain," he said. "While one-half ov yer pards ar' kindly up hyer ter corral me, I'll go down an' interview the rest."

With these words he began to godown the incline foot over foot with the ease of the chamois that leaps from crag to crag without displacing an inch of earth.

He seemed eager to reach the canyon below, and descended with a swiftness that would have astonished a beholder.

His keen eyes fairly flashed when they saw a mass of men beneath him, some on horseback, others stooping over an object that lay where the stair began.

"Hello! hyer's suthin', but it's all cut inter strings!" suddenly cried a voice.

A thrill passed to California Claude's heart.

"The gold puzzle, by Jove!" he ejaculated, but audibly. "I war fool enough ter b'lieve the man-monkey when he told me he had lost it somewhat among the mountains. An' Captain Leopard has got it at last! By Jupiter! his itching fingers shall not clutch it long."

He did not have to wait long for Leopard's response to the discoverer of the prize.

"Hand it hyer. Ab! it is buckskin. I feel like throwin' my hat ter ther stars ahead ov three cheers. We have found the duplicate chart ov Don Diavolo's bonanza. Hooray!"

The following minute a flicker of light caught California Claude's eyes.

It was a match in the hands of one of Captain Leopard's men, and Claude saw the triumphant face of the captain of the gold-pards, and the expectant features of the men who surrounded him.

At that moment the Plague of the Placers reached a flat rock about fifteen feet above the group at the foot of the stair.

He clutched in each hand a revolver, richly ornamented and highly polished.

"Ar' ye sart'in ov it, cap'n?" the eager men were saying. "Don't get fooled. Recollect, we've hunted high an' low for the gold-trail these ten years. We'd hate ter be fooled now."

"Fooled!" laughed Captain Leopard. "Don't I know a good thing when I hold it in my hand?" And he held up to the gaze of his five companions the piece of buckskin which had been discovered under the hunchback's shirt and next to his heart. "Look at it!" he went on. "Gaze upon the key to Don Diavolo's bonanza. Ab! we stand near the threshold of success at last! Hyer it is—the puzzle which will be no puzzle at all after we get to work."

Who regrets now that he ever swore ter stand by Captain Leopard through thick an' thin?"

The answer was a shout that made Claude's eyes wince.

"I'll separate a few wolves," he said, in a low mad voice. "Captain Leopard, when we parted, I told you that we'd meet ag'in somewhar on the trail ter the lost gold city, an' that time has come."

He leaned toward the excited group who saw him not, and mercilessly thrust forward his deadly weapons.

In another second he opened on the unsuspecting desperadoes with both revolvers, and almost before we can pen a word of description, Captain Leopard stood alone!

And that, before he could draw a single weapon or definitely loca'e the slayer.

"Hands up, captain!" said the stern voice of Claude the Pitiless. "Don't drop that precious document, but hold it high above your head. I didn't expect ter meet you hyer, but whar you ar' I'm generally found. Our interests seem ter be ther same, captain; we're both bound for the land ov gold. What did you say a few nights ago about only one ov us gittin' that?"

There was sarcasm enough in Claude's voice to darken, as with a thundercloud, the face of Captain Leopard.

He threw a hasty glance at the men who lay at his feet.

They were revealed by the light which had communicated with the fringe of a jacker, and was blazing up with a good deal of force.

The wild man of the Sierras saw himself completely at the mercy of California Claude, whose revolvers seemed to possess a malicious grin as they looked him in the face.

Caught at last, and with the prize in his hand!

"Don't expect the seven yon sent up the other stair ter corral me," laughed Claude. "Thet ain't on the programme. Captain, it's kind o' unfortunate fer ye that I happened hyer just at this time. Now, sir, do me the favor ter toss that document up hyer."

What! throw the key to Don Diavolo's wealth at California's feet?

It was asking too much.

"Toss her up, captain, my saintly cherub, er I'll throw some cold lead down!" came from between the leveled revolvers. "I'll give ye one second. I'm not even a minute man."

There was but one way out of the difficulty, and that way was by complying with the bitter commands of the placer desperado.

Captain Leopard saw through it all.

"Take it, an' may it prove the greatest curse that ever fell to your lot!" he madly bissed. "There is your gold-key, but cut to pieces by som-body's bowie. California Claude, before you reach the big bonanza you'll rec'lv this shootin' matinee ov yours."

"All hunky, captain," laughed Claude, as the coveted buckskin fell at his feet. "Now stand whar year'. Move an inch an' thar'll be six dead six-footers whar five dropped awhile ago."

The two pistols still covered Captain Leopard, and a moment later California Claude came down the natural stair with his eyes riveted upon his mortal enemy.

He passed within six feet of the captain of the gold-fiends, whose orbs seemed to emit sparks of deadly fire, and not until he stood on the canyon trail at the edge of the firelight did he speak again.

"This seems ter be California's day, eh, my sweet-William ov the gold-trail!" he laughed sarcastically.

"To-morrow may be mine!" was the mad response. "California Claude, if you expect to reach the golden paradise you'd better drop Captain Leopard among his pards!"

"No; I like opposition."

"All right! Opposition to the death you shall have. In the face of Heaven, an' over the best pards man ever had, I swear that this right hand shall clutch your throat, or send you reelin' inter eternity with a bullet in yer brain! You may rob some men twice, but Captain Leopard but once!"

The answer was a derisive laugh.

"I like that kind ov spirit," followed the cachinnation. "My dear Leopard, when I get settled in Frisco drop around an' we'll talk over the race for Don Diavolo's bonanza. If you're the Leopard that can't change his spots, you seem ter get around lively anyhow. Good-night, captain. I've got the gold-key an' you hev five pards ter plant."

The placer sport ceased rather abruptly, for he sprung suddenly into the dense shadow of the canyon wall, and, while the piercing eyes of Captain Leopard still looked, he was gone!

The cause for Claude's sudden departure seemed to present itself in the men who leaped from the Devil's Stair, and landed at their leader's feet.

"Whar is he?" they demanded in fierce tones as their eyes fell upon Claude's bloody work. "Which way did he go? By heavens! captain, you don't want the lassoin' dog to live, do you?"

"I want him to die an' die he shall; but by my hand alone!" was the response. "He went off with the key to the biggest bonanza in Cali-

fornia. He shall never unlock the treasure-vaults, for I hev registered an oath in heaven. Thar's but eight ov us now, but that'll make the divvy bigger. Plant the pards decently an' then come to me." And Captain Leopard folded his arms and looked the sullen tiger that he was.

No man robbed him twice.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PROPHECY OF DEATH.

"I've got it again un' this time it leaves me not till I've deciphered the hell thing, an' stand over Don Diavolo's wealth!" ejaculated the man who was walking away from Captain Leopard and his pards with the buckskin chart clutched in his dark right hand.

He had the countenance of a man who had just resolved to do some perilous deed in spite of all opposing forces, and we need not say that men called him, wherever he was known, Claude the Pitiless.

Only a few days before he was to be found in the vicinity of Steeltrap; Captain Leopard and his pards and the hunchback as well were all there also.

What had brought about this sudden change?

The canyon of the Devil's Stair was miles from the capital of the gold-bills.

In a few words we can explain all.

One morning there was found chalked on one of the dark walls of a gulch not far from Steeltrap City a sentence startling enough to rouse the most sluggish gold-hunter.

It ran thus:

"The true trail to Don Diavolo's bonanza will be found in the Devil's Stair country."

Captain Leopard and his men thought themselves the first discoverers of the writing, and when they had mastered it they made haste to obliterate every letter; but with that strange fatality which sometimes shapes the lives of men, other parties had been there before them.

California Claude was one of these, and he lost no time in seeking the place indicated by the sentence.

He stopped not to inquire whose hand had traced the words, neither did his imagination suggest that they might be a part of some grand scheme of deception; but away he went, nor stopped until he rode beneath the stars that looked down into the canyon which the handwriting on the rock had transformed into the future battle-ground of our romance.

But the clew, the true trail—where was it?

The sentence said it was to be found in the canyon country, but without the map, the key to the provoking puzzle, how was he to find it?

Luckily for California Claude, fortune had thrillingly fulfilled the prophecy of the sentence.

The map was cut up, it is true by Eldorado's bowie, but the gold-key, nevertheless, had fallen into his hands again; but the capture had cost six lives at the muzzles of his revolvers.

The canyon of the Devil's Stair had given him a clew to Don Diavolo's bonanza, and he had a right to walk from the scene of the battle with eyes ablaze with triumph.

He had paid the hunchback for the scars on his breast.

Crooked Tom would never feast his snaky eyes on the hunted gold which, according to tradition, had been hidden for a century, and at least five of Captain Leopard's pards would not follow their leader to his final doom.

Claude, the Pitiless, registered a solemn oath in Heaven that night that he would turn back no more from the object of his ambition.

Don Diavolo's golden city was for him to obtain, and he would yet make Queen Bess its princess, forcing her to forget, in time, the youth who had won her love.

Not for one hour at a time had the Queen of Steeltrap left his thoughts.

He knew that after burying the mutilated rider of the white horse, she had turned from Steeltrap a real vengeance-hunter, and he doubted not that she would cross his path some day.

California Claude did not stop until he had covered a mile from the scene of his meeting with Captain Leopard and his men.

The moon was now peeping over some ragged peaks of the canyon range, and the soft light had suddenly revealed what at first appeared a statue carved in stone, and planted in the very center of the trail.

The shape was human and the statue stood nearly six feet above the soles of a rough pair of boots.

Claude the Pitiless saw it in time to halt unperceived.

"Another gold-hunter?" he asked himself as he mechanically drew back. "I wonder if the handwriting on the rock fetched him to this kentry? Ho! he's on the move!"

The man in the trail had taken a sudden start and was advancing toward the Placer Curse who had shrunk to the shade of the rocks.

All at once he turned and walked to a flat rock whose upper surface was bathed in moonlight, and California Claude saw him take something from his pocket.

"The man who wrote on the other rock!"

ejaculated the desperado. "By J. vel I'll be the first to get the benefit ov this information, an' I'll see that it benefits no one else. Write away old fellow. The sharpest eyes in the gold land ar' upon ye."

The next moment the sport saw that the man wore a mask which fell to his mouth, and from that discovery he watched him with more interest than ever.

The surface of the stone was perfectly smooth and in excellent condition to receive a message.

California Claude saw the mysterious being stoop over the rock, and watched his hand move back and forth as he wrote rapidly.

The Sierra bandit held his breath as he looked, and did not stir until the writer had straightened, and was reading his work with apparent satisfaction.

The next moment he walked away, passing close to the outlaw whose eyes had not lost sight of him for a single second.

Claude the Pitiless could scarcely wait until he had seen the unknown disappear, then one bound carried him to the rock.

He saw at a glance that the handwriting before him and that seen in the Steeltrap country were identical; but the words were not the same.

Heavens, no!

With dilated eyes, and with blood rushing like a lava flood through his temples, the lassoer of the Sierra read:

"Died on the gold trail in the year of Lord, 1878, Claude Cothard, otherwise known as California Claude."

"Died same year and on the same trail, Captain Leopard and his mountain wolves."

"Died on the same bootless errand Bonita Ben and Keno Kit—all fools!"

Before he spoke California Claude wheeled with a look of rage, as if he hoped to find the author of the obituaries behind him, and for a moment he seemed about to rush in the direction quietly taken by the masked Unknown.

"That first sentence is a lie!" he hissed. "I'm goin' ter make it the boss falsehood ov the century—I, Claude Cothard, whose name is mentioned thar. So we're all ter perish on this bonanza-trail, ar' we? That's a glorious prospect you've mapped out for us, old Hidden Face. I den't keer who you ar'. You may be the devil himself, for all I keer. If you ar', I'd advise you ter go home, for by Jerusalem! ef I get a chance at ye, I'll make perdition hunt another king! He wrote my name first," said Claude—locking at the writing on the stone, "just as if he expects me to be the first ov the lot ter go. I'll see that I'm the last. He throws a good line, doesn't he? Writes like a 'Frisco writin'-master. By George! I'd like ter peep under his mask."

California Claude did not hear the velvet step that was approaching, and the moon did not throw the shadow of the new-comer the right way to prepare the outlaw for an unexpected meeting.

All at once a hand dropped on Claude's shoulder, and he sprung up as if a serpent had hissed on the rock before him.

"Don't draw, California," said a cool voice. "Hez that blamed fool been writin' on the stones ag'in?"

Claude the Pitiless could not but stare into the face of the man who confronted him.

They were physically each other's equals, perfect specimens of mountain desperadoes, who carry their hearts on their sleeves, targets for bowie and revolver.

The coolness of his confronter took California Claude aback.

"Read for yerself," he said, pointing at the inscription. "We're all named thar. In the mind ov that masked galoot, we've all got ter settle accounts on this very trail."

The new-comer stepped up to the stone, anxiously regarded by Claude the Pitiless, whose hand, strange to say, did not move toward a single weapon.

"He put Keno Kit an' me down at the end!" suddenly exclaimed the man, as he straightened and wheeled upon California Claude. "Does that mean that we're ter go under last?"

"I don't know," was the response. "I'm not sure of one thing, Bonita Ben. I'm not goin' under at all on this trail."

A singular light beamed in Bonita's eyes.

"Whar's Keuo Kit?" almost mechanically asked Claude.

"I don't know. He left Captain Leopard the night somebody shot an arrow through his neck. But he's still alive to die on the gold trail, this writin' tells me."

The lips of the Placer's Scourge curled with a sneer.

"Oh, that's all a lie!" he said. "Do you believe it, Bonita?"

"Wal, I should whisper not," was the answer. "Seebyer, California," and the speaker's swarthy hand touched the bandit's sleeve. "Thar's gold whar Don Diavolo is enough, fer two. I hed the gold-map awhile ago, but it slipped through my fingers an' I hevn't time ter go back an' get another copy. I war studyin' the hull puzzle out when I lost it, I war gettin' all the threads an' separatin' 'em in splendid

style. Now look hyer. You've got a duplicate—"

"Me?" interrupted Claude recoiling an inch.

"You!" And the eyes of Bonita Ben seemed to pierce the gold-hunter through and through. "You took it from Captain Leopard awhile ago at the expense of five lives. Now I'll make a proposition. Let us become pards an' reach the big bonanza together whar we will find yaller rocks enough ter send us to 'Frisco millionaires in sombreros an' buckskin. In union thar's strength, California, an' together we kin make that handwritin'. It's a part ov it, a lie! You've got the gold-puzzle an' I kin read it. I could ask Queen Bess for it to-night—for the secret, I mean—but she couldn't give me any light."

California Claude uttered an exclamation of joy.

"Do you know whar she is?" he cried.

"I do."

"Then pards we ar'" and the hands of the two men met.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WILDCATS EYES.

DID Bonita Ben really mean what he said when he told California Claude that he could, if so disposed, question the Queen of Steeltrap about the gold-secret that very night?

Certain it is that the fleetest steed in the Gold Range could not bear him back to Steeltrap City before dawn; then, if his words were true, Bess was not very far away.

She, too, had penetrated the wilds of the canyon mountains like Captain Leopard and the rest of the gold-hunters, and at the moment of the interview between Claude and Bonita Ben, she was nearer than the two worthies thought.

It seemed as if fate was bringing all the parties together.

Walking over a narrow trail and followed by a horse whose nose almost touched her appeared the girl once happy in the capital of the gold-region.

The two weeks of hunting since we saw her last holding the bridle of the white steed that carried a headless rider, had left their marks on her features.

Her face had become thinner and paler, but none the less beautiful.

Her eyes possessed a burning luster they had not possessed before, and in more ways than one her aspect told the story of the hunt for vengeance.

Not once, it seems, had she doubted that the headless horseman was Fearless Frank whose tattooed chart had cost him his life.

If the men of Steeltrap doubted, they had told her nothing, and she did not notice that Comanche Jim and a stalwart companion saddled two horses and galloped out of camp right away after the funeral.

She believed that Bonita Ben had robbed Fearless Frank of the tattoo and of his life, therefore, she declared that she would hunt the villain down, and leave him a prey to the vultures of the Sierra.

She had come to the country of the canyons because she had struck a certain trail that led her thither, not that she had read the first handwriting on the stones which declared that the clew to Don Diavolo's buried wealth was to be found there, but she tracked Bonita Ben thither.

Queen Bess wanted revenge, not gold.

The trail over which she walked the night that witnessed the events recorded in the foregoing chapter was rough as well as narrow.

The girl's horse looked jaded, as if she had ridden him a long distance at good speed, and now she appeared to be resting him by walking herself.

"We'll get there by and by, Flying Star," she said with an encouraging smile to the steed. "It has been a long trail, but they all end, however long. When we have reached the end may be we'll turn our faces toward the coast, leaving behind us among the gold-hills recollections that can never be effaced. Throw that one demon across my path, fortune! Bring me face to face with the greatest fiend in California, and I will agree to see that he troubles earth no more! I will shrink from nothing. My own hands will send through this wild region a horse and his rider whose appearance shall turn the cheek of the bravest pale!"

Queen Bess looked appealingly toward the stars as she delivered the sentences just recorded.

She evidently meant "business," and woe to the man she hated with a fervor that almost fired the blood in her veins.

She moved on over the narrow trail followed faithfully by the horse, and showed no signs of halting, until a little gulch was reached.

"We're back again, Star," she said in a pleasant voice. "This part of the gold-country is as well supplied with caves as the mountains round about Steeltrap. We were led hither by fortune I verily believe. A rest to-night, and then for a renewed hunt to-morrow."

The horse seemed to recognize the surroundings, for he thrust his head into a cleft in the gulch wall and gave a low whinny.

Queen Bess was quickly at his side.

"Yes, we'll take repose," she said, and a moment later the twain disappeared.

If the reader could have followed the Queen of Steeltrap he would have seen both her and the horse turn aside into an opening quite ample enough to receive them, and darkness instantly hid them from the stars.

Queen Bess kept on until she struck a lucifer and lit a torch which she found with ease as though she possessed the eyes of the night-hawk, and the next minute the blaze revealed the interior of a cave whose walls were almost smooth, and whose ceiling was high, and roughness itself.

The horse stood still until the girl had divested him of saddle and bridle, when he crossed the floor to the cavern and lay down with an almost human sigh of relief in one corner.

"I envy you, old fellow," said Bess. "You'll be at rest in five minutes but I—I must watch awhile."

Why?

Did she expect enemies? or, had she been chased by some one through the mountains?

A vengeance-hunter herself, it was not unlikely that the object of her hatred had turned on her.

The girl stuck the burning torch into a suggestive crevice in the wall and leaned against the stone near by.

"I almost wish some one would come," she said to herself. "It would be a relief; it would break the monotony of my hunt for the man who eludes me like a will-o'-the-wisp."

She fastened her gaze on the corridor that led from the trail without to the cave she then occupied with a wishful look that more than confirmed her words.

No one came.

The silence about her grew so intense that she heard her own heart throb.

"What was that? Is my haunt inhabited?" she suddenly exclaimed, turning to the right.

The answer was on hand in the shape of two balls of fire that burned amid the gloom some distance away, and on a line with a crack in the wall at a point ten feet higher than her head.

She looked a long time before she moved or spoke again.

"I have a fellow tenant and a dangerous one, too," she said. "Those are not human eyes. I would give a year of my existence if they belonged to Bonita Ben!"

Taking the torch from the wall, Queen Bess held it behind her, and advanced toward the two fiery balls with a revolver cocked in her right hand.

"I want no companions like the owner of those eyes," she went on, seeing them shining still at the same place where she first noticed them. "Both of us cannot inhabit this retreat at the same time, Mr. Wildcat."

Reaching the ledge on which the "cat" had taken a position, the fearless girl managed to climb up, and once more advanced upon him.

For a few moments, and until she had nearly reached a spot suitable for firing, the brilliant orbs continued to glare defiantly at her, then all at once they disappeared, and Bess heard something move away.

"You don't get away by an ignominious retreat!" cried the Queen of Steeltrap, following with more alacrity than ever. "I cannot rest while I know that your eyes blaze like fireballs in this cavern. Face about and let us fight it out! Steeltrap City against Wildcat Cavern. Ha! coward! won't you accept the challenge?"

There was not the slightest response, and the girl kept on skirting the fringe of the ledge, and traversing a part of the cave she had not explored at all.

Indeed, she was not aware of the existence of the ledge or shelf, and its length astonished her the longer she kept on without reaching an end.

All at once the ground began to slope, and appeared to go downward toward a level with the floor of the cavern proper.

"I'm in a cavern of mysteries!" she exclaimed, halting for a moment. "I never dreamed that it had corridors so extensive. Thanks to my wild-eyed visitor, I am making some remarkable discoveries."

Then she resumed the pursuit, which she enlivened every now and then by calling on the mountain cat to halt and show fight.

Once or twice she saw the flashing eyes, but only for a second; they were suddenly blotted out like stars by skurrying clouds of storm.

At last they turned and glittered with fight.

"Ha! I've chased you to the end of your lane, have I?" ejaculated Bess. "At bay at last! Now, sir, just glare at me for a minute, and I will plant a bullet between those blazing balls. I'll agree to strike center and to kill instantly."

The mad orbs continued to regard Queen Bess with fiery ardor, while she glided toward them with revolver half-raised.

She saw nothing but them; at that moment she wanted to see nothing else.

"Ten feet more and I'll drive a bullet into my target," she murmured. "Would to heaven those eyes belonged to the arch fiend of Steeltrap City!"

Ten feet more;

It was a short distance, but the girl was not destined to cover it.

All at once the ground under her feet seemed to give way.

She uttered a piercing shriek of horror, and clutched wildly at a smooth edge of rock as she fell.

In an instant the eyes that had lured her from safety disappeared, and she found herself falling through darkened space!

It was a terrible moment for the Queen of Steeltrap City.

Fortunately, she alighted on her feet, and then fell to the ground stunned, and for a moment feeling as if every bone had been broken.

At her side lay her torch which still sent forth a light, and this discovery sent a thrill of rejoicing through her frame.

She was not to be left in darkness and this was something to be thankful for.

"Heavens! that devilish cat is going to leap upon me!" rung suddenly from the girl's throat, as she shrunk from the pair of gleaming eyes that glared at her from a terrible height.

Quick as thought she felt for her revolver, but to her horror discovered that she was no longer the possessor of one.

Then she staggered to her feet, and recoiled beyond reach of the animal's powers.

"Now, come down here and we will fight it out!" she hissed, assuming an attitude of defense and brandishing her only weapon, the torch, in her right hand.

But what made her start back even toward the wildcat with another thrilling cry on her lips?

Her eyes had suddenly caught sight of an object on the floor of the pit which seemed to chill her blood.

"My God! can it be that accident has solved the long-sealed mystery?" she cried. "What is it I see before me? A skeleton! And what are those dark-colored rocks that surround it?"

Queen Bess stooped and picked up one of the nugget-like stones and examined it in the light of her torch.

"It is gold—almost solid gold! What is your gold-map after all? I have found the gold-city without it. I stand in the presence of Don Diavolo's skeleton!"

It was, if true, a thrilling "find," and in the excitement of the moment the Queen of Steeltrap forgot that she had fallen into a place from which there might be no escape.

All at once the terrible truth of her situation flashed across her brain.

She sprung over the disconnected boulders and began to search the place with the torch.

Everywhere she found the nuggets, which she knew were golden ones.

The supply seemed inexhaustible.

But she wanted to escape.

She explored every available part of the pit, poked the torch into every crevice, and at last came back to the skeleton with an ejaculation of despair.

"Merciful Father! is this to be my end?" she cried. "Is Don Diavolo's golden grave to be mine? Tell me, Heaven, if my hunt is to end in my own death?"

The pit took up the echo and hurled one word back at her—

Death!

Queen Bess fell senseless to the ground!

CHAPTER XXIV.

TOO RICH TO DIVIDE.

OVERHEAD, at the rim of the opening through which Queen Bess had fallen, burned the fiery eyes that had lured her to her doom!

The torch went out before the girl recovered consciousness, and left her in the blackness of darkness.

When she revived, she no longer saw Don Diavolo's skeleton and the riches that surrounded it, but she instantly recalled her late thrilling adventure, and the recollection sent an icy chill to her heart.

What should she do—how escape from the strange prison into which she had dropped?

Queen Bess lost no time in getting upon her feet and relighting the torch, which had almost burned itself out.

It no longer afforded the light it once had, but still it enabled the Queen of Steeltrap to distinguish her surroundings.

"What good will the secret of the gold-cave do me if I am to die in it?" she asked herself. "Men are fighting for it now among the canyons and in the mountains, but I have found it without effort on my part. Would to heaven I could have thrown the treasure at their feet before they sent Fearless Frank headless over the well-beaten trails of death and gold! If you had never lived, Don Diavolo, I would not be a captive and unhappy at this hour," and she held her torch over the old skeleton while she addressed it.

"What is this?" she exclaimed, suddenly stooping. "As I live, it is a silver plate with an inscription."

The object which had attracted the girl's attention lay under the bones of a skeleton hand, and she quickly picked it up.

It was indeed a piece of silver about six inches square, and she saw that it contained an

inscription in Spanish, a language which she had learned from the several Mexicans who frequented Steeltrap City.

She held the silver plate close to the torch and after a little while had made out the following sentences:

"This man is Don Diavolo, who has been buried in his golden tomb by his enemies. His Indian bride is with him. They will never leave this place, and this treasure shall always curse the eyes that find it. Vengeance belongs to man as well as to God!"

The plate fell from the girl's hand as she finished reading the inscription, and her eyes wandered instinctively to the skeleton.

"I don't see the bones of his Indian bride," she said. "They cannot be here. This treasure has cursed me in more ways than one, but I will get beyond its baleful influence."

A fierce growl almost broke the resolution of the last sentence, and Queen Bess looked up.

The eyes that had been regarding her had disappeared, and while she watched and waited for their reappearance her torch suddenly flickered and went out.

The next moment her heart seemed to stand still.

She had heard a human voice!

"Hyer's a hole in the ground!" it said. "I'm in for explorin' everything till we hit the right place. I tell you, pard, we're on golden ground, for what keeps Captain Leopard, California Claude, Bonita an' the rest ov the bonanza-hunters hyer, ef we ain't? We hevn't got the gold-puzzle ter go by, but we'll git thar just the same."

"Mebbe the eyes we saw went down thar."

"All right. I'll find 'em at the bottom ov the pit," was the response supplemented by a laugh. "I'll put my bowie betwixt my teeth an' go down prepared. Hyer; give me the lasso."

Queen Bess drew back and held her breath.

Who was coming down to her?

The voice had a familiar sound, yet at that moment she could not recall the name of its owner.

The light that burned above the opening was the light of a torch, but it did not serve to show the faces of the men there.

"I will know in a minute," murmured the girl. "Be that man my enemy, he must lead me to freedom!"

The next moment the beauty of Steeltrap saw a rope lowered from the opening above, and then the figure of a man appeared to her vision.

She noticed that he clutched a torch in one hand, while he clung to the lasso with the other, and carried a bowie between his teeth.

He was a well-limbed fellow, clad in dirty buckskin, hatless, and with a mass of black hair enveloping his ample shoulders.

Queen Bess waited eagerly for him to swing around, so that the torch would reveal his features.

Down the rope he came, like a man who had made such journeys before, and at last landed on the ground.

"All safe so far, an' no animile," he shouted up to the partner above. "This looks like an extensive place, but no gold yet."

At that instant he turned toward the Queen of Steeltrap, who was crouched on the cavern floor at the foot of the wall, and she almost started to her feet with a wild cry.

It was Comanche Jim, the man who had succeeded Bonita Ben in leadership in Steeltrap City—a desperado of the coolest stripe, with Indian blood in his veins, and no regard for human life.

Bess knew him well, but that did not break her resolution that the visitor to the famous gold-cave should secure her freedom, whoever he was.

Comanche Jim stepped back from the swaying rope, and swung the torch about so as to reveal the interior of the cavern.

The watchful girl saw his eyes catch sight of the skeleton and heard the ejaculation that passed his lips as a hasty stride carried him toward it.

"Great Caesar! I've found the big bonanza!" he cried in a husky whisper, and he stepped hastily to the rope.

"Fusten the rope an' come down hyer!" he said to the man above.

"All right, Comanche."

Three minutes later the rope swayed back and forth under the weight of another man, and Comanche Jim stood near by, waiting for him with much impatience.

His eyes gleamed with eagerness and victory, and Bess saw that he had transferred his bowie from his mouth to his right hand, and that he had stuck the torch into a little hole in the floor.

"His pard is Silver Sam. Ah! I know them both!" whispered the girl to herself. "Two mad fellows well met, sure enough."

It did not take the second desperado more than a minute to descend to the ground, and as he touched it Comanche Jim strode to his side.

"What hev ye found?" asked Silver Sam.

"Don Diavolo."

"No."

"By the eturnal, he is hyer!"

"Whar?"

"Yonder," and Comanche's left hand pointed toward the skeleton. "Go forward, Silver, an' look for yerself. Thar's piles ov gold around him."

With intense triumph lighting up his eyes, Silver Sam started forward, turning his back squarely on his pard.

The next second Comanche Jim darted at him noiselessly and with the swiftness of doom itself.

Up like a rocket went his ten-inch bowie, and when it came down like a thunderbolt, Silver Sam threw up his hands and pitched forward dead already!

"This bonanza is too rich ter admit ov a divide!" remarked Comanche Jim. "I hev found it, an' I keep it all myself!"

This terrible tragedy did not seem to occupy the space of two seconds.

It came to Queen Bess like a flash, but left its mark behind.

If Comanche Jim had been listening, he might have heard the exclamation his terrific blow brought to her lips.

The hal-dazed girl sprung up and appeared on the eve of darting toward the dangling rope, but the stalwart form of the swarthy assassin blocked her way.

"I own this golden city," said Comanche Jim picking up the torch. "It belonged to Don Diavolo once, but it is all mine now. By Jehu thar's ore enough hyer ter bu'st all the faro-banks in Frisco! Won't I lay 'em open when I git thar?"

When you get there, Comanche Jim—yes!

He came toward Queen Bess laughing at his triumph.

The girl saw that discovery was inevitable and prepared for it.

From the eyes that seemed to see everything there was no escape.

All at once she started up, facing the mountain killer, and he recoiled as if from an apparition.

"It is I—Queen Bess!" cried the girl, following him up and catching at the arm that suddenly sent the crimsoned bowie above his head. "I don't want an ounce of this accursed wealth, but freedom! You must help me to that, Comanche. We have been friends in Steeltrap. You know the oath I took there—to hunt down the slayer of Fearless Frank—"

The desperado suddenly interrupted her with a laugh.

"You'll hev a good time findin' him," he said. "But I will not fail."

"Thet is ef I see fit ter let you carry the secret ov this boss find out ov hyer."

"I don't want it. Vengeance, not gold, is my desire."

"Thet's all well ter say now," was the reply.

"What!" exclaimed the girl her eyes flashing indignantly. "Do you mean that I am to stay here?"

"Pretty much that way."

For a moment she faced him looking up into his eyes, then all at once she bounded to Silver Sam's side.

"Drop the shooter!" cried the gold-hunter starting toward the girl.

The answer was a laugh of derision.

"I am master here!" cried Queen Bess, and Comanche Jim saw himself covered with a revolver which the girl had snatched from the dead man's belt in the drop of an eyelash. "I make no promises now. I force my own terms. Swear to help me from this place, or by the stars above us! I'll burrl a bullet through your head. Hands up. Swear or die!"

The hand that held the revolver did not quiver; the eyes behind it blazed resolution and threatened death.

Comanche Jim still clutched the bowie and made no move.

"Are you going to swear?" asked the girl.

"I guess I'll hev ter," he said, with apparent sullenness. "Yes, Queen Bess, I'll help you from this place, but I'll possess it all the same."

"You may, for aught I care," was the reply.

The girl lowered the revolver, and walked toward the Steeltrapper.

"Yes, I'll give you liberty!" he said, fiercely, under his breath, as he eyed her maliciously. "When I touch you, my gentle gazelle, I'll throttle you an' the golden secret forever!"

Queen Bess was in his power.

CHAPTER XXV.

A TREACHEROUS COMPACT.

CALIFORNIA CLAUDE's alliance with Bonita Ben by the flat rock which we have seen the masked man cover, with startling obituaries meant one thing above all others just now, the discovery of Queen Bess's whereabouts.

He said to himself:

"Show me the girl, set me on her trail, Bonita, an' we'll dissolve partnership. Big as the lost bonanza is, it's too small to be divided."

It was the same resolution in substance which fell from Comanche Jim's lips after dealing to Silver Sam the terrible death-blow in the gold-cavern.

Too small to be divided!

Before the two worthies who had become pards from necessity turned from the rock, the

inscriptions were obliterated by Claude's hand, and then they went up the trail side by side.

Strange pards they were, united for the present by love of gold, and not likely to become sombreroed and buckskinned bonanza kings in Frisco.

"Now," suddenly said California Claude, turning to his new pard, "tell me where Bess is. Do you know that I've taken a fancy to tha Steeltrap beauty? The big bonanza is only a secondary object with me now. You told me awhile ago that you could communicate with her yet to-night if you wanted ter. How far away is she?"

The question was direct, and the eyes of Claude the Pitiless were riveted upon Bonita Ben as he spoke.

"Only a little further than the gold-map you carry under your jacket," was the shrewd answer. "There was one line in the diagram that stuck me, but I wns gettin' it all right when I lost the bull thing. Eldorado stole it from me."

Claude ran his hand beneath his braided jacket, and without hesitation drew forth the buckskin chart and placed it in Bonita's hands.

How the desperado's eyes glittered as his hands closed on the precious document!

He stopped as if halted by a road-agent, and unfolding the map held it before his face in the moonlight watched closely by the Placer Scourge.

"This map is badly cut up by Eldorado's bowie," he remarked. "He did it to prevent his hunchbacked pard from strikin' the gold-trail."

"I know that. Wal, Crooked Tom will never get that."

Bonita Ben's lips curled in a smile and his eyes went back to the map.

"Hyer's the line," he said. "You see it runs about the way a snake crawls through the dust. Hyer it turns suddenly to the right an' keeps on until it reaches this spot, whar it stops at this black dot."

Bonita had thrown the buckskin over his left arm, and the index finger of his right hand was following the line indicated.

Eager to see the tracery explained California Claude was looking on, and the two formed a singular and striking tableau in the trail.

"That's whar I stuck," said Bonita Ben his finger, covering the black mark at the end of the somewhat tortuous line.

"At that spot?"

"Right thar. I kin locate a part ov the rest ov the chart; but thet place sticks me."

California Claude glanced into his companion's face.

"I wonder if he's goin' ter keep his part ov the bargain?" he asked himself. "I agreed ter trade thet map for sutbin' definite about Queen Bess, but he shows no signs ov keepin' his promise."

Bonita Ben no longer seemed aware of Claude's presence; he had fallen into a deep study, as if his life depended on a proper solution of the mystery he held on his arm.

"Can't you catch on?" asked the handsome desperado.

There was no reply.

Claude ground his teeth and raised his hand until it touched the arm of Bonita Ben.

"Can't you catch on?" he repeated.

"Not now; I war just takin' a new turn on it. I kin get the bull thing in my head, but thar the lines an' dots get jumbled up. I think a man'd go mad studyin' thet gold-map. I hed it down pat once for I saw the livin' map."

"On Fearless Frank's breast?"

"Yes."

"Wal, you'll see it thar no more. After Queen Bess buried the headless corpse at Steeltrap she turned huntress."

"She wants me," said Bonita Ben with a grim smile. "She accuses me ov beheadin' Frank."

"For the map?"

"Yes."

"Is she on the right 'ail?"

"Thet's for her ter find out," was the evasive answer.

"It war cruel whoever did it," said Claude.

"It wns a mean trick!"

Bonita Ben did not resent these words, but let his eyes wander back to the buckskin lying across his arm.

His coolness irritated California Claude; it made his eyes flash.

The two pards seemed on the eve of a rupture already.

At once Claude's hand moved slowly toward the chart.

"We'll resume the study ov this mystery," he said as his fingers touched it. "We've got many days before us an' plenty ov time. From what I know, we're both hunted men you by the girl an' the banded pards of Steeltrap, I by the same pards an' Captain Leopard an' his hounds. Hadn't we better fight it out with them before we hunt the bonanza?"

"No. We'll go on ferreting out this clew, an' if we find our enemies in our way, why, we'll turn on 'em! The golden cave is the prime object ov our hunt. But you want the girl you say?"

Claude's countenance underwent a sudden

change, which told that Bonita Ben had come back to the subject that deeply concerned him.

"Yes, I want Queen Bess," he said.

"All right," answered Bonita as he allowed Claude to take back the gold chart. "Let me see whar are we now?"

He looked up at the mountains that towered above them, and studied the trail for a few moments.

"I've been in this kentry before, but I never dreamed that Don Diavolo war somewhar byer," he said, with a smile. "That's why I got at some parts ov the chart so readily. The other night I saw a horse comin' down the mountain. It war onto me before I knew he war nigh an' I saw in the saddle the girl who wants this Sierra chick."

"Queen Bess?"

"Queen Bess. Wal, I stepped aside an' let her ride on, for I hed more sense than to stop her. She's quicker than lightning with the dropper. I followed her like a cat an' saw her ride into a rent in the mountain wall whar that must be a cave."

Almost breathless and burning with impatience, California Claude listened to his companion's narrative.

He was eager to have that rent in the rocks located.

"I didn't foller her into the cleft, for I'm no fool," continued Bonita Ben much to his auditor's disappointment.

"But you know whar it is!"

"I do."

"An' you could find it after night?"

"It war after night when I found it at first."

"But the girl was your guide then."

"Ov course, but I never forget."

"Then show me that rent!" cried the desperado eagerly. "I want to know where Bess is before mornin' comes."

"Do you intend to hurt her?"

"No."

"You will probably inform her that I am in these parts."

"Why should I?"

"Because she hates me an' you love her."

California Claude's first response was a smile.

"Can you put your finger on a time when I betrayed a pard?" he said, almost fiercely. "If you can't trust California Claude, keep your secret. By the eternal! I will find the girl myself."

The speaker stepped back with a look which told that he could be independent of the man from Steeltrap.

Bonita Ben followed him with a sudden stride; the map of the gold-region was slipping through his fingers once more.

"Don't get your feathers elevated," he said. "If you think I can't trust you, go an' find Bess yourself. Wait till I say I can't put confidence in California Claude."

Claude did not speak, but his softened look said:

"Go on."

"The cleft is not three miles from here. I will show you to it, an' you can go in an' explore the place," Bonita Ben continued. "I don't care about meetin' Bess just now. I will take you to the door, an' mebbe ring the bell for you, but I won't walk into the parlor," and he concluded with a smile.

"All right; fix the programme to suit yourself. Show me the rent in the mountain. I will ask no more."

"Come, then. We go to the girl's retreat."

Bonita Ben walked off with rapid strides, eagerly followed by California Claude, whose eyes gleamed excitedly at the thought of finding the beautiful girl who had given him the slip.

In a short time the three miles of mountain-trail were passed over, and the man from Steeltrap halted suddenly and then recoiled.

"My God!" he exclaimed, as his eyes seemed to fly from his sockets and he threw his hands to his head. "Why didn't I think of this before?"

He stood in the trail staring like a madman at the wild scenery that surrounded him.

It seemed as if a gleam of light or the solution of the gold-mystery had suddenly burst upon him.

"What is it?" asked California Claude, and at the sound of his voice Ben's whole aspect changed.

"It was nottin'," he said. "I suddenly thought ov suthin', ov no importance to our gold-hunt. I've missed the trail. I must have had my head full ov suthin' else besides Bess an' her retreat. Yes, this place is strange to me. We will have to go back an' start afresh."

Under his black mustache California Claude madly bit his lip.

"It's a transparent sham," he said to himself. "Bonita lies. He has made an important discovery; he hasn't missed the trail. By Jerusalem! he sha'n't stand between Bess an' me at this stage ov the game!"

The next moment the placid sport had covered the space between himself and the man from Steeltrap.

"Look hyer. I want Bess," he hissed as his hand caused a revolver to leave his belt. "You

lie like an Injun when you say that you've missed the trail. Look into my eyes, Bonita Ben, an' lie ag'in ef ye dare! Show me the rent in the rocks, or we'll dissolve pardnership in the shaw ov the deadliest dropper in Californy!"

The two men did not stand three feet apart.

The left hand of California Claude clutched Ben's right wrist, and "the deadliest dropper in Californy" was looking over his raised arm into his face.

"Show me Bess!" he commanded. "I see through yer pardnership proposal now. You wanted ter study the gold chart ag'in—that's all. Show me the cleft in the mountain, or was it a lie out ov whole cloth, too?"

Not a word passed Bonita Ben's lips; he gave Claude look for look with the interest of deadly hate and victory.

All at once he shook the sport's hand loose and knocked the revolver above his head.

"I do nothin' under compulsion," he said. "I'll show you the rent when I've found the trail. Hevn't I told you that I've missed it? Prove me a liar if you kin!"

California Claude was nonplussed, and faced Bonita with the revolver only half raised.

"Claude, the Pitiless, your boast is that you've never betrayed a pard; mine is that I never lie," the Steeltrapper continued. "Have patience an' you will find Queen Bess. We'll have to go back to hit the trail to her retreat. I have got bewildered somehow. My head is full ov suthin' besides the daisy ov Steelrap."

He turned half way round as he finished, with a curious look at California Claude.

"I'm with you," said the desperado, stepping forward. "We'll go back to the trail, but we'll not be likely to reach Bess's cave before mornin' now."

Bonita Ben nodded his head and turned back. Claude did not see his eyes glisten, nor hear him say to himself:

"After all I've got a fool for a pard."

The man from Steeltrap was deceiving California Claude.

At that moment they were moving away from the big bonanza.

CHAPTER XXVI.

COMANCHE JIM'S MISCHAP.

"Ef I ain't a daisy shoot me for a gopher! A man what kin stumble on a gold-mine is a boss galoot an' nō mistake. Bonanzas ain't ter be picked up every day, especially the kind I struck awhile back. I feel like a turkey cock in new feathers. I kin see myself bu'stin' the faro banks ov ther coast cities. Oh, I'm a daisy: I'm a jumper!"

The man who spoke thus emerged from a huge rent in a mountain wall.

He led a fine horse by the bridle, and once in the mountain trail, he sprung upon the animal's back with the agility of the practiced acrobat.

"I've got ter make sure ov my good thing," he went on. "Thet Sierra blossom thought she could trim me down, but she didn't! I reckon she'll show in spirit-land the prints ov Comanche's fingers on her swany throat. I'm the sole owner an' possesser ov Don Diavolo's bonanza, an' by the shinin' stars, I'll take in no more pards. The last one I had war one too many. When I stumbled on to the rocks, I gently dismissed 'im; hed no further use for him."

He was riding from the rent from which he had just emerged, happy as a lark and thoroughly satisfied with himself.

Comanche Jim had cause for his exuberance.

Had he not found the prize for which it was said ten thousand men, desperate fellows for the most part, were hunting throughout the length and breadth of the land of gold?

And he had reached it without having to wade through blood for it, had found it and all its treasure without vexing his brains over the hunted chart.

It is true that he had killed his pard, Silver Sam, in the gold cavern itself, but in his mind that was "nothing."

Human life among the gold Sierras of the American West possesses not the value which characterizes it in other quarters of the world, and under other circumstances.

The men who carry their hearts on their sleeves, as it were, expect to fight for everything they get, and, having got it, they must sometimes battle for its retention.

It was thus with Comanche Jim.

He had already shed human blood for his new prize and was willing to "carry the war into Africa" to keep possession of it.

What had he done with the Queen of Steeltrap whom he found in possession of the bonanza when he reached it?

Has he not said that she would carry to "spirit-land" the prints of his fingers on her throat?

And such fingers!—long, dark, and powerful!

He knew that more than one desperate hunter for the famous bonanza had reached the canyon country; that California Claude, El Dorado, Bonita Ben, Keno Kit and Captain Leopard and his pards were all there.

He knew that he could not hope to call the mine entirely his until all these desperadoes had ceased to hunt for it.

He had overheard a conversation in Leopard's camp, that having broken with the captain, Keno Kit had left the country, but observation since reaching the canyon country had demonstrated the unreliability of this report.

Keno Kit, once a member of the captain's gang, was in the gold region.

Comanche Jim rode on down the mountain trail, keeping an eye on every spot of moonshine, and on every shadow.

Now that he had found the treasure buried for a century, he must be on the lookout.

He put a mile between him and the gold cave when there suddenly whistled past his head a rock of several tons' weight and striking the trail below his boots bounded into mid-air and disappeared a thousand feet beneath!

It was the incident of a second, and left both Comanche and his horse almost breathless.

"Jehosaphat! missed by a hair!" ejaculated the dark desperado when he found his tongue. "No man threw that stone down, for no man could move it. It war a token ter show me how blazed uncertain life is, an' by what a slender thread the big bonanza hangs from my hands. Go on, hoss. You ar' scared worse than I am. The boulder's wind almost pitched me from the saddle."

It was a lonely place for an accident of that sort, and the Steeltrapper gazed upward as if he expected another similar missile to come down from the same place.

The horse fairly quivered with fright, and Comanche Jim had some difficulty in starting him forward.

It took a good many coaxings, and some sharp touches with the spur, and at last, completely out of humor, the gold-finder drove the little points deep into the horse's flanks, sending him forward with a snort of pain.

For several hundred yards Comanche Jim was carried over the trail at breakneck speed, but all at once the horse slackened his gait, and the following second a stern "Halt!" rung out.

"Found already, by Jove!" muttered the Steeltrapper as his hand flew to the handiest revolver about his person.

At that moment of anger and disgust it must have occurred to Comanche Jim that riches sometimes take wings and fly away.

"I can't kick for he's got the drop on me," he growled. "Confound it! what made me come byer anyway?"

"What are you doing on that horse?" asked the person who had sounded the sudden halt.

This pertinent interrogative startled Comanche.

"It's my own horse, an' I reckon—"

"Liar! That steed belongs to Queen Bess!" was the interruption. "Give a strict account of how it came into your hands or I'll separate you two!"

"You will, eh?" hissed the Steeltrapper through set teeth all the tiger in his nature aroused by the last words. "Who talks to me?"

The response was the nearer approach of the desperado's confronter, and he looked over a leveled repeating rifle into a face almost as white as the spots of moonshine on the trail.

"I talk to you, Comanche Jim!" the owner of that rifle said. "Will you tell me how you got that horse?"

"Mebbe so."

The Steeltrapper leaned forward, curiosity in his eyes, and with his teeth still tigerishly set.

"Very well; we'll begin to get at the truth!" and the next instant the rifle spoke and Comanche's left arm dropped at his side with a yell from his throat!

"Is that a sample ov yer tactics?" he cried.

"Yes, and a poor sample at that," was the response. "I mean business, and will do nothing else. That was only the left arm. The next time it may be the right, and you can wander helpless through the canyon region."

The threatened prospect was enough to pale the desperado's cheeks.

"Git down from that horse!" commanded his persecutor.

"If I don't—what?"

"Cold lead!"

Comanche Jim mumbled something and slid sullenly from the saddle.

He could not lift his left arm; he knew it was broken, slattered at the elbow.

"I'd like ter see you fairly," he said to the person in the saddle. "I want ter see yer face so I kin remember it. Ride forward inter that spot ov moonshine an' give me a squint at ye."

"I will."

The next moment the speaker came forward and halted on the spot designated by the desperado.

"Here I am, Comanche," he said. "You've seen me before. I—"

"Great God!" interrupted the Steeltrapper staggering back almost to the canyon wall. "In the name ov Tartarus, whar did you find yer head?"

The answer was a laugh that awoke the slumbering echoes of the canyon.

"I did not have to look for it," was the laughing reply. "It is where it has always been—on my shoulders."

"That settles it. I never more than half-

believed that headless corpse was you! how you would skeer Cap'n Leopard an' his pards,"

"Git back to the subject, Comanche. How did Flying Star fall into your hands?"

"Mebbe I found him runnin' loose among the mountains."

"Which you did not. Queen Bess and her steed are inseparable. You found him and his mistress together. Speak!"

The youth's cheek sunk to the rifle-stock again, and Comanche Jim recoiled an inch.

"Hold yer fire!" cried the desperado throwing up his right hand.

"Out with the truth then."

"All right. You ride straight ahead to a trail that leads to the right at a big flat rock. Follow it down the mountain to a little gully, ride up it half a mile to a leanin' tree that makes a bridge across it. Thar's a cave thar."

"And Bess, too?" asked the listener eagerly.

"I shouldn't be surprised."

"Thanks. Now good-night, Comanche. Stand aside."

The Indianified villain obeyed, and as Fearless Frank rode past the girl's steed he leaned over and taking the bridle-rein led him away.

Comanche Jim watched him with furious eyes, but said nothing until a sudden bend in the trail bid boy and horses from sight.

"Ho! ho! ho! Fool!" he laughed bitterly. "I've told you the boss lie ov the century. Go on an' if ye find Queen Bess in a cave that has no existence, 'ceptin' in my imagination, I'll divide Don Diavolo's bouanza with you. Besides, I'll get even with ye for wingin' me!"

The villain ceased, but he did not see Fearless Frank slide from the saddle and glide back through the shadows.

Suddenly another shot rang out, and a yell told that Comanche Jim's right arm was as useless as the left.

"There!" cried the young miner. "A broken arm for a lie! How do you like it, Comanche Jim?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHOT FROM HIS SADDLE.

THE prospect before Comanche Jim was decidedly uninviting.

The shot that shattered his best arm almost threw him to the ground, and it was only by a mighty effort that he maintained his equilibrium.

He saw Fearless Frank disappear before the echoes of the second shot had died away and he was powerless to follow and take vengeance.

"My tactics war bad," he growled to himself. "I war a fool for openin' my mouth afore the young galoot got away, but I couldn't keep to myself how I hed hoodwinked him. What am I good for now? This doesn't look like breakin' the faro-banks ov the coast towns."

A sudden faintness came over him, and he staggered to the canyon wall for support.

All at once he found himself falling forward, and he attempted to throw up his hands for support, but the crushed bones refused their wonted office and with a cry of pain and despair, the desperado of Steeltrap sunk helpless and insensible on the scene of his defeat.

It would not matter much if the villain had to die there.

The moon rising higher in the unclouded sky showed her light upon a man lying at the foot of the wall, and the mountain cat's cry as she scented blood awoke the echoes of the lonely place.

Comanche Jim was to see Steeltrap City no more; he was on his last trail, although, despite his shattered arms, his time had not quite come.

Fearless Frank continued down the canyon trail with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

The horse he led scarcely needed the hand at his bridle-rein to keep him alongside.

Flying Star seemed to recognize in the boy his young mistress' stanch friend, and was quite willing to move along.

"I see through it all now," said Frank to himself in audible tones.

"Bonita Ben sent somebody through the mountains without a head. That somebody must have been the person he brought blindfolded into my presence the day after he induced me to accompany him from Steeltrap. He got Ju-z the Mexican to transfer from my breast to his prisoner's my tattoo map. Then he led the captive away and I saw him no more. Ah! Bonita, you played a shrewd and terrible game. I am your walled-in prisoner no longer. Why didn't you finish me while you had me in your power? You would have had things your own way on the hunt for the big bonanza. Now, I am at liberty. Look out, villains!"

Fearless Frank's words have partially explained the mystery attached to the headless rider of the white horse.

Who he was the youth did not know, but he supposed him to be some one caught among the mountains by Bonita Ben's lasso and utilized in a terrible manner to contribute to that villain's success.

"I'll force the truth from Bonita's lips when I come across him," supplemented Fearless Frank. "One of these days we will meet and

then—then my gold-schemer we will settle up. I still carry my gold-map despite Captain Leopard and the rest of the would-be Shylocks of the Sierra. And I will keep it, too!" he finished with emphasis. "I have sworn that no man shall wrest from me the tattoo on my breast."

He had effected his escape from what Bonita Ben had intended should be for the present at least a walled-up tomb.

Two weeks had passed since his incarceration but he had not been all the time immured.

After his escape he went back to Steeltrap City, and in a private interview with a friend whom he knew he could trust, he was made acquainted with everything that had transpired there during his absence.

He heard of the white steed and his headless rider, of Bonita's "break" with the men of Steeltrap, of the burial of the mutilated corpse by Queen Bess, believing it to be his, and, finally, of her oath to hunt the murderer down, and her departure from the capital of the placers.

"I'll find her," he said, resolutely, when he had gathered all this strange and startling information. "I still carry the gold-key, and the fiends who want it shall be forever disappointed."

And so he left Steeltrap to ride the trail again, and to drift finally into the canyon-country where we found him in the previous chapter.

He had paid Comanche Jim for his perfidy, and believed the villain perfectly harmless, but there were other men in the mountains equally as bad.

Claude the Pitiless, Bonita Ben, and Captain Leopard and his gold-pards were still on the trail.

Comanche had directed the youth toward the gold-cave, although the cavern under the leaning tree was a well-coined fiction which had no foundation whatever.

There was no trail leading to the right at a large rock; the villain had simply invented the whole story to get rid of one who had got the better of him.

Fearless Frank rode on, however, with no well-defined object in view.

Perhaps he had half-resolved to test Comanche Jim's directions, although that worthy had pronounced them falsehoods.

"If this horse would take the trail I would be in luck," said he, glancing at Flying Star. "He's kept by me long enough to follow. I'll give him a trial anyhow."

The young miner relinquished his grip on the rein and watched the horse fall a little behind.

For a few moments it looked as if Queen Bess' steed was going to quit his companion's company, but he presently moved forward again and kept alongside.

"He ought to trust me," smiled Fearless Frank. "His mistress and I have been much together."

For a mile or more Flying Star kept up his pace without any demonstrations calculated to rouse the youth's hopes, but all at once he stopped and moved toward the wall on the right.

"What's up, Star?" asked Frank, at once interested in the steed's actions. "Ha! there's a rent in the wall and a big one, too. What! have you been here before, old fellow? Lead on; you'll find me always at your heels."

The horse looked knowingly at the young miner and entered the gap.

Fearless Frank loosened the pistols in his belt, and cocked the rifle with which he had paid Comanche Jim for his perfidy.

A moment later he had entered the gap at Flying Star's heels, but all at once the guiding horse backed toward him with a snort, and a hand clutched the boy's wrist in the darkness.

"Who are you?" asked Frank.

"Come out into the moonlight and see."

The voice possessed a somewhat-familiar tone, but Frank could not identify its owner by it.

"I'm the Lazarus ov this accursed kentry," continued the voice. "I never owned a foot ov California land, an' I never want ter!"

"I know you now!" exclaimed Frank, as they reached the light without. "You are Eldorado Eph."

"Thet's my handle, an' you—Great Jehosaphat! whar did you get yer head?"

Once before that same question had drawn a smile to the youth's lips, and he smiled at it again.

"Open yer shirt. You look like Fearless Frank, but I will not believe till I've seen whether you carry the gold-key in the old spot."

Frank willingly complied with Eldorado's request, and the mountain pauper—as he delighted to call himself—leaned forward and looked long at the map in the moonlight.

"They're all fightin' for that," he said, "but you've got it still. By Jeru-salem, boy, if you say so I'll help you keep it, an' I'm a hoss when I take sides! Crooked Tom an' I hev dissolved pardnership forever."

"Where is he?" asked Frank.

"Whar I've just plant... ."

"Dead!"

"Dead ez a smelt. I found him lyin' at the foot of the Devil's Stair. Somebody encountered him half-way up the place, an' tossed him

to the bottom. Oh, I know the dog!" and Eldorado clinched his hands.

"What kind of a place is this gap?" asked the youth.

"I'll be hanged ef I know. I hevn't explored it, but dropped in, just ten minutes afore you came, for a snooze."

"Bess's horse turned in here as if she was somewhere near."

"Do you think so?" asked the Californian, eagerly.

"It may be."

"Then we'll investigate. Just before I struck this place I ran ag'in' Keno Kit, Captain Leopard's old right bower, you know."

"Then he is here?"

"Yes; isn't four miles from us now. He's broken with the captain, an' all because ov you."

"On my account!" exclaimed Frank.

"That's what I said, didn't I! Do you remember—Kit told me—that when Captain Leopard asked you your age, and when you got the tattoo, an' you told 'im, he flared up an' war for flyin' you right off—an' that he said 'eight from twenty-one leaves thirteen!'"

"I well remember that!"

"Wal, that caused the rupture between him an' Keno. Kit wanted him ter explain that, an' he wouldn't, so they quit, an' Captain Leopard gave his men orders to shoot Keno on sight. But they won't do it," laughed Eldorado. "Kit an' them hev been pards too long through thick an' thin. Keno laughed when he told me about the captain's orders. He'd like ter find you, Fearless."

"Who!—Captain Leopard?"

"No, Keno Kit. He thinks he's got a secret."

"Hark!"

The mountain pauper paused abruptly, and then said in lowered voice.

"Somebody's ridin' this way. Back into the ap!"

The twain forced their horses back into the reut in the wall, with as much expedition as possible, but kept their faces turned toward the trail and their hands at their revolvers.

Certain sounds, now distinct, told that some one was approaching.

"I hope it's Keno," whispered Eldorado, and the look that Frank returned told him that his expressed wish was not unwelcome.

"Thar's more than one hoss," and Eldorado's band fell suddenly on Fearless Frank's own.

It was true.

There were sounds in the mountain pass that told plainly that quite a little cavalcade was advancing, and all at once it burst upon their sight.

"The chief villain of the lot!" fell from the boy's lips, and before Eldorado could prevent, he thrust a revolver forward.

"No. Let the gold-devil go. Don't expose us byer. Thar's six ov 'em!"

The hand of the gold-hater had fallen upon Fearless Frank's arm, and he had whispered this advice at his ear.

But the youth jerked loose.

"That man would have fayed me!" he cried.

"I have sworn to pay him back!"

The next minute he sent his voice ringing through the pass.

"Blood for blood, Captain Leopard! You die on the trail of Don Diavolo's bonanza!"

The last word was followed by the sharp crack of Fearless Frank's revolver, and the next second a frightened horse dashed down the road, dragging over its rocks the bleeding form of the gold-desperado.

"Now, hands up every demon of you!" said Frank to the thunderstruck pards as he rode into the moonlight, but with wild cries of "A ghost! a ghost!" "The dead's alive!" and so forth, they disobeyed at the risk of their lives, and galloped after their leader.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BACK TRACK TO VENGEANCE.

CAPTAIN LEOPARD'S hoss was noted for swiftness, and frightened by the sudden shot which had emptied his saddle, he tore down the trail unmindful of the human being he was dragging at the stirrup.

The seven pards left of the famous fourteen followed their leader at breakneck speed, but their steeds had covered nearly two miles before they came up with him lying on the ground with his horse licking his bruised face as if in apology for his conduct.

The pards sprung from their saddles, and picked their leader up.

The ordeal through which he had passed told terribly on him.

He seemed at the uttermost confines of life, and his breaths were gasps while his eyes stared madly at his friends.

They found a rivulet near by, and washed him with tender hands.

The clear cold water revived him.

"Take me back to the dog who fired that shot!" were his first intelligible words.

"We can't, cap'n."

"Can't?" he roared. "Why not?"

"It war a ghost."

Captain Leopard met this explanation with a grim smile.

"Whose?" he asked laconically.

"Fearless Frank's. Do you recollect that two weeks ago we found his headless corpse ridin' through the mountains?"

"So we thought then."

"So we think now."

Leopard did not speak for a moment.

"Wal," he said resolutely, "I'll go back an' settle with the ghost."

The men looked at one another.

They knew what it was to oppose his resolves; they had never disobeyed him before.

"Ar' ye goin' ter take me back?" he asked.

"Bad hurt as you ar'?"

"Yes! Set me on my horse."

They picked him up and placed him in the saddle.

He tottered, but bronze hands held him up.

"Tie me on," he said.

This command was obeyed without a word, and the captain looked on with eyes that blazed with mad anticipation.

"I'll land at the big bonanza yet!" he grated under his breath. "Shot by a ghost—not much! The galoot that tumbled me is ov flesh an' blood. I'm goin' back to him—not as Captain Leopard, but as a devil incarnate. Ar' ye through?"

The question was addressed to the man who was fixing the last rope.

"All right, cap'n," was the response. "You can't fall off."

"Good! now we ride to vengeance!"

Two men placed themselves beside their leader, and watched him narrowly as they rode back toward the rent in the canyon wall.

They doubted his ability to hold out, although they knew his wonderful endurance and muscular powers.

It was a thrilling ride; the little advance guard with ready revolvers and senses on the alert, and Captain Leopard, stern and defiant, with his face beaten out of recognition by the rocks over which he had been dragged.

He seemed to take no account of the result of Fearless Frank's shot.

If it had wounded him mortally, his desire for vengeance seemed to be keeping him alive.

When the party reached a spot within a quarter of a mile of the mountain rent two men slid to the ground and glided forward.

They went to the mouth of the gap, and listened for a moment; then hastened back.

"We've corralled two men," they reported.

"Two?" echoed Captain Leopard. "I thought thar war but one."

"Thar's two in the gap."

"Very well. I'm not in' fightin' trim, but I will get even with them all the same. I'll ride forward a piece an' leave it all to you."

"We'll bring 'em out."

"Alive, mind you!"

"Alive, cap'n."

"Go ahead."

The men dismounted and tethered their steeds, but Captain Leopard's horse was led forward to a place nearer the gap, and at his own request he was left alone in the shadows, so near the wall that if he grew faint he could lean against it.

He did not dream that he was so near the gold-cave for which he had hunted untiringly for ten years, that he could almost touch from where he sat the huge nuggets that surrounded the bones of Don Diavolo, its guardian.

If a thought of the startling truth had flashed across his mind he would not have remained there, but would have pushed forward to possession with his pards.

The seven men crept forward with the greatest caution; they entered the rent and discovered the cave—the corridor which eventually led to Don Diavolo's wealth.

They did not know that, without the gold-map, but guided by the finger of revenge, they had found the avenue to millions.

On, on—on hands and knees a part of the way, crept the relentless seven.

Fearless Frank's revolver had spared them, and they had come back—but not to spare him.

At last the pards halted.

A short distance ahead in the light of a torch stood two figures.

"Look at it close," said one, as he held something up to his companion between thumb and fore-finger.

"I am not mistaken. It is Queen Bess's ring!" was the reply. "The girl has been here. Flying Star would not have turned into the rent if he did not know the place. She has been left a prisoner somewhere by Comanche Jim. Not an inch of this cave shall go unexplored. Come! To work at once!"

Fearless Frank snatched the torch from his companion's hands and started forward.

"Now!" whispered the leader of the seven gold-pards. "Cover 'em both. I'll astonish 'em!"

In the twinkling of an eye, seven revolvers were thrust forward and the stern voice of the mountain desperado filled the place.

"Hands up or die!" he said.

Fearless Frank turned in an instant, and took in the situation.

The light of his own torch showed him the

level ground and the blazing eyes that backed the mask.

As for Eldorado, his hand shot toward his weapon, but stopped suddenly when it touched it.

The mountain ruffians had the upper hand.

"Just postpone yer hunt for the Queen ov Steeltrap, Fearless Frank," continued the leader of the seven. "We want ter transact a little business that'll be entirely satisfactory to us. Elevate yer hands above yer heads, both ov ye, er we may touch a few daisy triggers. Thought we wouldn't come back, eh?" Thar's just whar ye got left."

What could the two friends do but obey?

They were at the mercy of as hard a crowd as ever tramped the gold-trails, and they knew that the slightest resistance on their part would seal their fate.

They held up their hands, hoping for better times, for an opportunity to turn the tables on the merciless seven.

"Forward—straight toward us," commanded the leader of the seven, and Frank and his friend advanced without ceremony.

"Thar's a man outside what wants ter see you," the ruffian continued, as he laid one hand on the young gold-miner's arm. "We thought you war a ghost awhile ago, but the cap'n war right. Thar's no man nigh this time ter interfere with an arrow. My opinion is, Fearless, that you had better hev withheld yer fire awhile ago."

"No," said the youth quickly and with spirit, "I would not take back that shot, ill-advised though it may have been. I hope it has terminated the career of one of the meanest men who ever infested the gold-hills."

"You'll see d'rectly," was the only reply.

Fearless Frank and Eldorado were placed in the midst of their captors, and with the torch to help them watch the prisoners, the whole crowd moved toward the trail outside.

Not a word was spoken.

The dark eyes of the desperadoes flashed as they regarded the twain who had fallen into their clutches, and their hands were ready, at the first motion to escape, to send bullets through their heads.

"Who wants to see me?" asked Fearless Frank as he stepped into the canyon.

"Wait a minute an' see. He is burnin' to see you. You'll hardly recognize him now, but he'll make you recollect him."

There was a world of terrible meaning in these crisp sentences.

Frank said no more, but shut his lips and marched on.

The victorious band conducted the two friends, with proud step, toward the spot where they had left their leader.

All at once they halted, and those ahead recoiled with ejaculations of surprise.

They had reached the spot, but it was vacant! Captain Leopard was gone!

"Whar is he?" demanded the leader of the crowd. "We left 'im hyer! He war in no condition to leave. He said he would wait. What's become ov the cap'n?"

"Thar's chalk marks on the stone wall thar," suddenly said another member of the gang.

"Did he leave 'em?"

There was a rush for the wall of the canyon, which at that particular place was flat and very smooth, and in the moonlight all read these words:

"Captain Leopard has parted with his mountain wolves forever!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE GOLD KEY BRAND.

WHAT had happened to the desperate leader of the banded gold fiends?

Let us see.

For some minutes after his pards left him to "corral" the occupants of the cave beyond the rent, whoever they might be, Captain Leopard remained on the spot where they had left him undisturbed.

His face, brnised by the rocks of that very trail over which his frightened horse had dragged him but a few minutes before, was swelling so fast that he would soon be unrecognizable even by his friends.

His wounds gave him no pain, but had produced a benumbing sensation which he could not shake off.

He waited for the return of his pards with much impatience, and many muttered anathemas were heaped upon the head of the person who had gotten him into his present condition.

He saw not the person who was watching him from a spot not far away, a man whose face was partly concealed by a mask which dropped just below his mouth.

When the watcher came forward it was with the noiseless tread of the mountain panther, and with his eyes still fastened on the solitary horseman alongside the canyon wall.

All at once he halted at the captain's side, and the first intimation of his presence that that worthy had was the dropping of a hand upon his leg.

The touch sent a thrill through Captain Leopard's frame, tingling all his nerves, and starting him into life.

"Hell, captain," said a voice that tingled the lower part of the mask. "Come down here if you please."

The answer was a stare from a pair of eyes that glittered behind the swollen cheeks.

"Oh! I see you can't do this without assistance," continued the Unknown, noticing that the gold-hunter was fastened to the saddle. "Well, I'll not disturb you, but will take you as you are."

Captain Leopard started. "Who ar' you?" he asked almost defiantly. "I am not your captive!"

"You are not, eh? Well, captain, under the circumstances are you going to be chooser?"

The very coolness of the masked man was tantalizing in the extreme.

"Come," he said laying his hand on the captain's bridle rein. "We are going away."

"With you! I protest. By heavens! This will be the dearest capture you ever made—"

"Because your seven wolves are near!"

"Wait an' see!"

"All right, Captain Leopard. Wait! I will inform them of your departure."

The strange being, still holding the bridle in his left hand, turned 'o the canyon wall and with a piece of chalk wrote upon it the startling sentence that closes the previous chapter:

"Captain Leopard has departed with his mountain wolves forever!"

The redoubtable captain himself leaned forward and read the words as they sprung from under the writer's hand.

At the end of the sentence he ground his teeth till they nearly cracked.

"That's a lie," he hissed as the masked man turned toward the horse.

"We'll see, captain," was the response. "Now we're off. When your dainty pards come back they'll have something to astonish them. What bruised you up so?"

"I was dragged over the trail at my horse's heels."

"When?"

"Only awhile ago."

"Bless me! if you didn't get bunged up pretty considerably," laughed the captor. "You wouldn't make a lady-masher now, captain!"

There was no response except that made by the mountain bravo, and without more ado he found himself being led from the scene of his surprise.

Vainly did he try to recognize his captor by his eyes and voice.

The figure possessed no clew to the mystery that surrounded him, and the captain gave up in despair while he cursed his ill-luck, and resolved to pay him back for the interference.

"I'll corral this sleek devil," he said under his breath. "I will live to order his execution by the boys in the most approved manner. One of these days, my smart Aleck, I'll drag that mask from your face, an' expose your features. You're some old enemy ov course an' this, you think, is to be the hour of your revenge."

Captain Leopard was completely at the mercy of the man into whose hands he had fallen.

His swollen hands could no longer grasp a revolver, and at the rate his face was swelling he would soon be deprived of sight.

This did not look much like reaching the lost gold-mine where fabulous wealth was ready to greet the lucky discoverer, nor was he likely ever to prove to California Claude that he (the captain) was not to die this side the golden portals.

On, on walked the man in the mask, watching his prisoner like a lynx.

"Isn't he never going to stop?" ejaculated Captain Leopard. "In heaven's name, who is he, anyhow?"

At last, more than a mile from the scene of the capture, the masked man turned abruptly into a narrow trail that debouched from the main one, and halted about twenty rods from its beginning.

Without a word he cut the cords that held Captain Leopard in the saddle, and so suddenly that that desperate worthy almost fell to the ground.

"Shall I help you, captain?" he asked.

"No," hissed the gold-hunter. "I want no help to get from my own saddle," and he got down, watched curiously by his strange enemy.

"Can you see?" was the next question that greeted him.

"Yes."

"Then look at me."

The right hand of the Unknown went toward his face and the next moment the mask was removed.

The uncovering startled Captain Leopard and drove him forward.

"I'll give you a good look, my tiger."

At the same time the captor snapped a match on the wall at his right hand and held it before his face as it flared up.

It revealed a clean-cut and pale face cleanly shaven all to a mustache that dropped over the mouth, a pair of black eyes that sparkled like a serpent's, and a well-built figure full of strength.

It showed also the rock-torn and dusty clothes of Captain Leopard, his bruised and swollen face and hands, a sight repulsive and horrid.

It was almost impossible to believe that this was the handsome chief of the famous gold league, that the torn face was that of dashing Captain Leopard who with upraised hand had sworn that he would reach Don Diavolo's bones, and divide the wealth that guarded them.

For some moments in the light of the match the two men faced one another.

There was a smile at the corners of the captor's mouth as he waited for Captain Leopard to speak.

"What! have you forgotten me, Albert Leopard?" suddenly asked the man of the mask.

"I know you now!" and the gold-fiend seemed to go back an inch.

"Well, it took memory a long while to do her duty," was the cool rejoinder. "The ride at your steed's heels must have blunted recollection."

Captain Leopard said nothing, but stood before the speaker like a man who had suddenly awakened from some unpleasant dream.

"I thought you war dead," he said at last.

"Of course you did. Eight from twenty-one leaves thirteen, captain."

"I know that. Have you been hunting me ever since?"

"No. I had other duties to employ years of my time. I knew that fate would hold you for me, although death almost cheated her tonight."

"Confound it, yes!" shot the captain. "Wal, byer we ar' face ter face. Thirteen years have passed since—"

"There!" was the interruption and the speaker's hand touched the desperado's arm. "I am not here to recall that time in words. You have sworn to find Don Diavolo, I believe."

"I have."

"You found the gold-chart?"

"Yes."

"On the breast of a living being?"

"That's a fact."

"And you tried to get it!"

"You seem ter know that."

"I do know it. The arrow in your throat didn't injure your voice."

Captain Leopard's swollen bands shut madly.

"You shot that shaft!" he hissed.

"Oh, but I did! It was not intended to kill."

"But it came mighty nigh doin' so."

"Then, my aim was too true."

"If it hed wiped me out, what?"

"We wouldn't be standing here," was the smiling answer.

Captain Leopard was in no humor for joking and his look resented the approach to it.

"Captain, do you still want the gold-key?" suddenly asked the enemy.

"Don't play with me," was the reply. "I'm in your power for the present."

"Forever if I say so."

"Yes, forever. I am helpless. I suppose you are goin' ter put a pistol at my head an' end the career ov Cap'n Leopard. Do it, an' then reap the whirlwind ov revenge!"

"At the hands of your pards, eh?" laughed the listener.

"At the claws of my mountain vultures!"

"All right, captain; but you haven't answered me. Do you still want the gold-key?"

There was bitter sarcasm in the voice that clothed the question.

"You ought ter know," snapped the captain.

"Very well; then, I decide that a desire to possess it is still uppermost in your mind. A man who hunts ten years for a prize like that is not likely to give it up in an instant. My dear cap'ain, you shall attain the summit of your desires. You shall this night possess the gold-key. It shall be yours while life lasts. Whenever you go it shall accompany you, and I am only too happy to bestow it upon you in return for a past which death alone can blot from my mind. Stand where you are. Move a step and the prize you are about to obtain shall never be yours."

The man of the mask stepped to one side and drew out from beneath an overhanging rock a quantity of dry grass and sticks.

From over his swollen cheeks Captain Leopard watched him with unwonted interest.

He saw another match struck and applied to the grass which burned freely igniting the sticks until a hot fire had been obtained.

While it grew hotter and hotter it sent forth no light, for the arched rock prevented.

Suddenly the captain's enemy produced a singular piece of iron work at the first sight of which the gold-hunter started.

It consisted of many little bars that crossed one another at irregular places, seemingly with no regard for right angles, and here and there were little points of iron.

This singular piece of work the man of the mask threw into the fire, and watched it intently while it heated and gradually grew red.

Captain Leopard saw his eyes flash up at times and then die away as if some better thought had cooled their fires.

It was a strange scene for the time and place.

At last the enemy produced an iron rod with which he raked a piece of sputtering, hissing iron from the fire.

"Bare your bosom!" he suddenly said in s'ern

tones to the captain. "I am going to give you the gold-chart to keep!"

At that moment the iron rod became attached to the brand which was a duplicate in iron of the gold-map hunted and sought for so long, and the speaker stepped forward with it before his face.

"Open your bosom!" he hissed. "By the living God! Captain Leopard, I am going to give you the prize you've hunted!"

With a wild yell of terror the gold-demon retreated toward the canyon wall with the horrid brand hissing like a dozen fiery serpents in his face.

"Must I do it all myself?" cried the torturer. "Coward! can't you face your fate like a man?"

"Help! help! for the love of heaven, come on, my pards!" rung from the captain's throat.

With a bound the man of the mask sprung tigerishly upon him, and jerked his jacket open as he struck the wall.

The next moment the quivering flesh was exposed, but the gold-hunter was almost senseless.

"With the brand that is accursed, go down to doom!" thundered the enemy, as the iron was thrust against the captain's breast.

The following instant there pealed from the throat of the mountain rough a yell scarcely human, and below the stifling smoke dropped a human body at the foot of the wall!

"Look hyer! What have you done!" cried a voice.

"I've given your old pard what he wants—the gold-key!" answered the enemy as he wheeled upon the speaker. "Revive him or kill him; I care not which, Keno Kit!"

The hot iron fell at the feet of the man who lay at the foot of the mountain wall, and the torturer stepped back and with folded arms gazed calmly at the person who had arrived too late to prevent the branding.

Keno Kit looked a moment, and then went to Captain Leopard's side.

"The captain's dead!" he suddenly exclaimed.

"But look at his breast! He has the gold-key at last! No man will dispossess him now!"

Keno Kit looked but once, but he saw burned into the flesh of his old leader the key to Don Diavolo's gold!

"You failed to torture him long," he said turning toward the middle of the trail. "Now you will tell me—"

Keno Kit stopped suddenly for he was alone with the dead desperado.

The mysterious enemy had vanished.

CHAPTER XXX.

KENO KIT SHOWS A BOLD HAND.

In an instant Keno Kit was on his feet.

"Captain Leopard once refused to tell me what he meant when he said that eight from twenty-one left thirteen, and I broke with him," he said. "I had hoped to make him tell me yet, but now I never will."

No, Keno Kit, you will never force the explanation of those words over your old leader's lips.

The words chalked on the mountain wall by him of the mask and stared at by the seven pards had been startlingly fulfilled.

Captain Leopard and his human wolves had parted company forever!

Keno Kit went back to the dead desperado when he found that the terrible enemy had left the immediate vicinity.

"I don't hate that he killed you, captain; but confound it! I wanted to know why eight from twenty-one left thirteen to irritate you. I've got an idea in my head, but it may not be the kerrect one. I guess the boys wouldn't shoot me on sight, now that the old leader's gone. It's worth tryin' for anyhow."

He cast a farewell look upon the man lying dead in the dying gleams of the fire that had beaten the deadly brand, and turned away.

Tall and muscular, and darkly handsome, like so many of the gold desperadoes, Keno Kit cut a magnificent figure as he walked up the trail unconsciously taking the route pursued by the slayer.

Suddenly he came to a halt and then stepped aside.

"Some lady's out besides me," he observed under his breath, and his hand rested upon the butt of a silver-mounted revolver as he waited with eyes agleam with interest.

The rebel of the gold league did not have to wait long, for there suddenly came in sight two horses side by side, and an ejaculation of astonishment left his lips.

Somebody wholly unexpected by the ruffian had come in sight.

"Wal, ef that ain't a boss pardnership shoot me for a gopher!" he muttered. "The ends ov the world hez met, and the black-snake hez laid down by the rattler. But it's all for gold, an' thet accounts for it all I suppose."

Keno Kit was staring at the riders of the two horses, and he hugged the shadows of the rocky wall as they rode past.

He knew them at sight—California Claude and Bonita Ben!

"I'll just play wolf till ye increase yer gait," he said as he moved after the two horsemen who rode slowly along as if in no hurry to reach any

particular spot. "I'd like ter look at the agreement you two love apples hev entered inter, bang me for a sick kitten, ef I wouldn't. Just move along at thet gait, an' you'll not beat Keno Kit much ter Don Diavolo's dust."

As if to oblige their human trailer, the two strangely-united pards kept on at the same old pace.

They did not see the figure that moved cat-like among the shadows.

If they had looked back it is not likely that they would have seen their tracker.

"Hold up! hyer's suttin' in the trail!" suddenly exclaimed California Claude, as he drew rein and bent over to look at the object upon which his horse had almost stepped.

"By Jove! it's alive!" said Bonita Ben.

"An' human, too?"

Keno Kit stopped, but leaned forward, with the keenest curiosity written across his features.

"Who hev they found?" he asked, in inaudible tones. "Not the cap'n for he's behind us. Mebbe that brander hev been workin' in this quarter."

The following moment Bonita Ben's voice solved the question.

"Hang me, if it isn't Comanche Jim!" he exclaimed.

And Comanche it was, lying like one dead in the trail with a little pool of blood on either side of him, and with a dust-covered face, and stareful eyes upturned to the heavens.

The two pards dismounted and bent over the unexpected and singular "find."

"He isn't dead!" suddenly announced the Placer Curse.

"Not dead, but with two useless arms, if I kin see straight. Hyer, help 'im out o' the trail. We'll get at his story if he isn't too far gone ter tell it."

Keno Kit had become an interested observer of the scene before him.

He saw the two men lift Comanche Jim from the reddish dust of the trail and bear him to a grassy spot nearer the mountain wall.

Then they set about restoring him to consciousness, a task which to their joy terminated sooner than they expected.

All at once a yell of pain parted Comanche's lips, and the next moment he was heaping terrible curses upon the men for touching his arms.

"Who did it—who but the boyish curse ov Steeltrap!" grated the Indianified desperado.

"What's that?" cried Bonita. "Who wronged ya?"

"Fearless Frank."

The answer drove Bonita Ben upon his feet and for a moment he presented a picture of blank amazement.

"It's a hard cold fact," said Comanche, looking him in the eye. "If you undertook ter git rid ov the youngster ye've failed—that's all. You hoodwinked Queen Bass inter plantin' o' headless somebody in Steeltrap's dead-yard, but you didn't deceive me. Tbar war a big mole just below whar you cut the head off, an' that mole told me that it war a counterfeit corpse an' not Fearless Frank."

Bonita Ben smiled grimly, but he suddenly became serious.

"Whar is the boy now?" he questioned, eagerly.

"Wouldn't I like ter know?" was the quick retort, and the speaker's eyes seemed to become balls of fire. "I'm useless forever, so far as my hands ar' consarned; but I could use my teeth. Catch that young mountain tiger an' throw me bim! Let my teeth meet in his throat, an' I'll give him a passport to Tartarus!"

"But whar did he leave you?"

"Whar he shot me last, about a mile up this trail. I staggered arter him till I couldn't stand it any longer. With two shattered arms a man can't go far without gettin' weak. I'm useless forever, I say. No more mining for Comanche! I would give a world, ef I hed it, ef I hed never seen that mole on the neck ov your victim, Bonita."

Up to this time California Claude had said nothing.

He had looked on and listened, content to let his companion do the talking.

"Would you go back ter Steeltrap ef we'd set ye on the trail?" he asked.

Comanche Jim slowly turned his eyes upon the Pitiless, and looked at him a minute before he made reply.

"What's back thar for me?" he asked.

"Two better arms than you've got now," was the answer.

"I'm no fool," said Comanche, and he tried to lay one hand on Claude's knee while he spoke. "It isn't often that a galoot ov my constitution goes under with only broken arms. It takes more'n this ter give Comanche James to the vultures. I've got bizness hyer. When I go back to Steeltrap, I'll be heeled well enough ter buy out ther blamed diggin's. Useless arms, ef I kin see—I kin walk; an' by the eturnal skies! I will keep what I've found."

The two desperadoes exchanged lightning glances.

California Claude could not keep quiet.

"Do you mean the big bonanza?" he said.

Comanche Jim's lips closed suddenly, as if a command had shut them.

"Did ye hev the chart?" asked Bonita Ben.

"No."

"No man can find it without."

"What ef he should stumble on it?"

"Did you!"

The two pards spoke at the same time.

There seemed to be a twinkle of triumph in Comanche's eyes as they looked into the depths of the listeners' eyes.

"Did you stumble onto the lost bonanza?" said Claude sternly.

"Mebbe so."

"Show us the trail!"

"Look hyer! That's askin' too much of an entire stranger," said Comanche with the old grim smile again. "What ef you hed found it; would you tell Comanche James?"

California Claude said nothing but glanced at his companion.

"If it's half ez big ez tradition has made it it's big enough ter divide," said Bonita Ben. "We'll put you on yer pins, Comanche. We'll fix yer arms up an' give ye a chance at the youngster's throat. We will take in the rich coast cities ez the Three Bonanza Kings ov ther Sierras, an'—"

"We'll do nothin' ov ther kind!" suddenly interrupted Comanche Jim. "I war only seein' how eager you war ter git on Don Diavolo's trail—pou my honor nothin' more!"

For half a second disappointment of the bitterest kind appeared in the eyes of the two pards then Claude's yellow hand dropped on his shoulder.

"Help 'im up, Bonita," the Curse of the Placers said, and despite Comanche's pleading to be careful of his wounds they stood him on his feet.

"Now whar's the trail to Don Diavolo's dust?" demanded Bonita Ben in a voice which was a threat of something terrible to come if Comanche should attempt deception.

"By the dead pards ov Steeltrap, I war only tryin' ye, Bonita!"

"Don't lie! Your eagerness gave the whole thing away. You have found the lost mine—the long-hidden millions! Speak the truth, or die whar we hold ye."

Pushed up against the sides of the trail, Comanche Jim was held by the hands of the desperadoes.

He seemed on the eve of defying them anew for his eyes suddenly lit up with flashes and he assumed the air of the uncowed bully.

"We give you a minute, Comanche," continued Bonita.

"I'll take an hour."

"What! will you die with the secret?"

"Bet yer boots!"

Quick as a flash Bonita's revolver leaped from his belt, and the muzzle touched the miner's temple.

"Will you keep it now?"

"Bet yer teeth!"

The next moment a hand struck up Bonita's arm, and a stalwart fellow stepped between the two ruffians.

"Jehu! who ar' you?" they asked in one breath.

"A man what wants fair play!—Keno Kit!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

"COLONEL SARDINE AND MAJOR JACK."

GROPPING her way around the wall of a cavern which was unseen because of pitch darkness, was a young girl who tottered somewhat as she walked.

Queen Bess!

The reader will readily recollect that we left her in the clutches of Comanche Jim after that desperado had killed Silver Sam, his pard, in order that he might possess Don Diavolo's wealth without division.

We have heard Comanche intimate that the beauty of Steeltrap would trouble him no more, but he had overrated the powers of the grio he had given.

Queen Bess still inhabited the big bonanza, and, instead of being a corpse, as Comanche Jim believed in the moment of his triumph, she was able to re-explore the wonderful place with her bands.

She did not know how long she had remained insensible.

It might be day without the gold-cave, but within, the darkness of night reigned, and the girl had no means of telling the time.

She was certain that Comanche Jim had departed.

At that moment he was staggering down the mountain trail with two useless arms at his sides, and swearing through clinched teeth a terrible revenge against Fearless Frank.

"I cannot perish here!" she exclaimed. "It can not be that I am to make the gold-cave my tomb. Father of mercy, give me liberty!"

The last sentence was a plea which would have touched a heart of stone.

It had hardly left her lips ere the sound of a seemingly distant pistol-shot reached her ears and made her hold her breath.

"Comanche is already fishin' for his posses-

sions," she said a minute afterward. "If he knew that I still lived he would come back and settle with me. The next time I might not be so easily conquered. Come back and try your choking over if you dare!"

An hour later, when on the eve of despairing, Queen Bess ran suddenly against a rope that daugled amid the darkness.

A thrill swept to her heart as she touched it, and she could hardly repress a shriek.

Was Comanche coming back?

Unable to answer this important mental question that flashed across her brain, she drew back her sole weapon, a revolver which she had picked up on the floor of the cavern during her gropings, and breathlessly awaited events.

"The rope won't reach," said a voice overhead.

"Hyer, splice my lasso to it," was the response. "Yours is a short one, anyhow."

She knew by certain sounds that the rope was drawn up again, but after awhile it was lowered once more, this time no doubt with the addition of another lasso.

Queen Bess did not recognize either of the voices she had heard.

More than one man was at the rounded opening overhead, and she believed that Comanche Jim had been captured and his discovery forced from him at the muzzle of a pistol.

"I'll go down, Sardine," said the voice that had spoken first. "If I touch bottom, you will follow."

"Sartainly! We've struck suthin' at last, Jack. Let the other pards hunt for the captain. We'll shift for ourselves awhile in the canyon-kentry. We might stumble on the gold-grave without the assistance ov the map we've hunted these ten years. Captain Leopard war a good one, but ef the writin' on the wall means bizness, we'll see him never more!"

Queen Bess felt her heart leap at the last words.

Comanche Jim was not overhead, but two of Captain Leopard's infamous pards.

The next moment she heard one coming down the rope, hand over hand.

"Safe an' sound, on golden ground, ha! ha!" laughed the unseen desperado, as he touched the floor of the cavern.

"Hyer I come, Jack," said the voice above, and the second sport came down.

Queen Bess, as motionless as a statue, a few feet away, heard this worthy rejoin his companion amid cimmerian darkness.

"Now for matches, Sardine. I've got the torch ready. Strike a lucifer an' we'll explore this hole in the earth."

A few moments' silence followed, and then the Queen of Steeltrap heard an exclamation of rage.

"I've lost every match! Kick me to the coast! if I've got a lucifer about my anatomy."

"You must hev 'em."

"But I hevn't—not a match!"

There was a curse and a growl that sent a pleasurable sensation to the girl's heart.

Darkness would shield her, and she would not be discovered by the mountain wolves who were as desperate as the man who had lately left her for dead where the nuggets of gold lay thickest!

"No matches? By Jehu! we're in a pickle. But let us search the place with our hands. We came near fallin' headlong down the hole up yonder, you know. It war the luckiest accident that we didn't. Now, thar may be a cave below this one, who knows? Feel inch by inch. If we strike loose rocks, they'll be the long lost nuggets!"

"Mebbe not, Sardine," laughed the speaker's companion. "It would be suthin' ef we found Don Diavolo without the map which cost the cap'n his life."

"Bet yer boots we'll find it sometime, Jack."

"An' stir up the mines as millionaires cz they never hev been stirred before."

"Think ov it!—Colonel Sardine an' Major Jack, ov Don Diavolo City!" And Queen Bess heard the two desperadoes chuckle audibly over the prospect apparently but a short distance in the future.

The absence of matches was not going to deter the two gold-seekers, for they at once began to explore the cavern with their hands.

The girl could tell that they were not approaching her, but she did not know how soon they would change their course and collide with her in the dense gloom.

It was a thrilling moment, and full of peril that almost chilled her blood.

All at once a loud cry of discovery filled the pit.

"Jehosaphat! hyer ar' bones!"

"No."

"Bones, by Jove!"

"It is Don Diavolo!"

"A thousand ounces of dust for a match?"

The speakers seemed several rods away, and Bess of Steeltrap knew that their hands had found the whitened bones which undoubtedly belonged to some unfortunate who had found the gold-cave a prison and a grave.

"Now is my time!" she suddenly ejaculated.

"If I do not escape now, I never will."

She had before fixed in her mind the probable

location of the lasso-rope which she knew was still dangling in the darkness from the opening in the roof of the cavern.

Without the least noise she started toward it, and to her utmost joy seized it with both hands at once!

The rope was rough and hairy, and the girl began at once a doubtful ascent.

At any moment she was liable to rouse the two men speculating over the startling discovery on the floor of the gold-cave, and she knew that to startle them would invite a fate terrible to contemplate for a moment.

The intense peril of her situation roused her to energy.

"I escape now or perish in the attempt!" she resolutely exclaimed. "I will not become the captive of the two mountain wolves growling over the Spaniard's bones!"

Hand over hand like a sailor, and with teeth resolutely set, the Queen of Steeltrap went up the rope.

All the time her ears were on the alert for sounds that might harbinger doom.

Moments seemed hours; her hands grew hot, the skin of the palms seemed on fire, but she kept on.

It was life or death to the beauty of Steeltrap City.

Suddenly her hand struck an obstruction that brought her to a halt.

She had reached the roof of the cavern!

The next minute she had passed beyond the opening, and lay half conscious in the darkness of the corridor above.

The lasso which had proved her salvation had fallen back into the cavern, and was dangling once more in darkness.

"By Jove! it is the big bonanza!" suddenly rung out a coarse voice that started the Queen of Steeltrap into life. "Sardine, we're bound ter become gold-kings in a land whar gold is plenty. Whar's yer hand, old pard? Shake! It's all ours! No map ter find a bonanza like this! We must hev matches ter explore this yellow paradise."

Instinctively Queen Bess laid her hand on the lasso-ladder and attempted to remove it from the rock to which bands stronger than hers had fastened it, but she could effect nothing.

Her next thought was to pull it up, but she felt a heavy weight on the lower end which overtaxed her strength.

One of the desperadoes below was already coming up!

"I'll foller ye, Jack," said the climber's companion. "Don't forget for a moment that we've stumbled upon the biggest thing on ice."

"Hurrah for Colonel Sardine an' Major Jack!" was the enthusiastic response, and the man on the lasso seemed to ascend the faster.

Queen Bess at that instant felt the want of a knife.

Her safety depended on the keeping of the two pards in the gold cave.

But knife she had none, and the mountain pard was fast lessening the distance between them!

His whole weight was on the black cord.

"I'll shoot it off!" suddenly said the girl. "My revolver, fortunately found awhile ago, must save me!"

The click of the lock, slight as it was, was not unheard.

"Hello! Sardine, what war that?" said the man on the lasso.

"I heard nothin', pard."

"But I did!"

With a quiet smile at the corners of her mouth, Queen Bess leaned forward, and set the muzzle of her weapon against the lasso.

"This shot decides!" she murmured, and the next second the corridor was momentarily illuminated by the pistol's flash, and a wild yell rose from the gold tough's throat as he fell!

"Who in Satan's name did that?" thundered a mad voice in the depths of darkness beneath the girl.

"The Queen of Steeltrap, gentlemen!" came the response. "I thank you for the use of the lasso and I leave it with you for future service, ba! ba!"

"You up thar? You, Bess ov Steeltrap? We've heard ov you; more than that, we've seen you. You shot inter Captain Leopard's face once."

"And I'm liable to do so again if he crosses my path. Good-night, 'Colonel' Sardine and 'Major Jack! When we meet again it may not be under circumstances like these."

"Bet yer life, it will not! We war born in Blue Blazes, the meanest camp in the Rockies, an' bigger demons than Colonel Sardine an' Major Jack never bored a brain!"

"Thanks for the information," responded the girl with a fearless laugh. "Really, gentlemen, I must be going. Since you've found the big bonanza I hope you'll enjoy it."

The answer to these words was a curse, and the whiz of a bullet that passed within a few inches of the girl's head.

Queen Bess drew back and turning about went down the dark corridor.

She felt herself almost free.

Five minutes later she stood under the stars that sprinkled the firmament with gold, and

felt like sending a cheer of triumph toward them.

"Free!" she said. "I've touched Don Diavolo's gold for the first and the last time. Now show me Bonita Ben. A little rest will fit me to tread again the trail of vengeance!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

MOUNTAIN MAZEPpas.

QUEEN BESS had escaped from the underground prison at last, and she had a right to rejoice.

The men left behind would have a fine time effecting their own liberation, and the girl smiled when she thought of them as still cursing her in the gloom of the gold-cave.

Don Diavolo's gold was likely to prove an unfortunate prize to all its possessors.

Already it had worked the ruin of several, and the ruin of others was liable to be recorded on the pages of mountain history.

It was not until several hours had passed that Queen Bess felt strong enough to move far from the rent in the rocks which led to the bonanza.

She was now without a horse; her own steed, the faithful Flying Star, had, she doubted not, fallen into the hands of Comanche Jim, and she was compelled to wait till fort me should deem it wise to mount her again.

Daylight overtook her still among the mountains, and the sun rose beautifully over the peaks and showed her the wild scenery of the canyons.

"Before night I will surely encounter some one," she said to herself. "They are all here—Claude the Pitiless, Bonita Ben, the man I want, Eldorado Eph—all! I will surely run across some gold-hunter—some ruffian who has been lured to this region by the trail of the golden chart."

By and by the girl grew tired and sought the seclusion of some bushes where she flung herself on the ground and fell asleep.

The sun crept higher and higher through the cloudless heavens, and the birds hopped from branch to branch over the sleeping beauty of the Gold Range.

It seemed that Queen Bess would never waken, fatigue had deepened her slumbers so.

Suddenly there came down the trail that skirted her place of repose the gallop of a number of horses.

The noise parted the girl's eyelids, and she saw a group of mounted men just beyond the bushes.

"Captain Leopard's men!" she involuntarily exclaimed. "They have a piece of property that does not belong to them; they have my horse."

Queen Bess cocked her revolver as she sprung up and started fearlessly toward the rough-looking men who occupied as many saddles on the trail.

Her eyes gleamed with resentment.

All at once she broke through the bushes and without a moment's warning presented herself to the mountain band.

"I want but my own," she said in response to their looks. "That horse yonder belongs to me. Flying Star, come here!"

The handsome steed which had recognized her voice from the first attempted to obey the command, but his rider almost jerked him upon his haunches, and looked at the girl in a manner which told plainly that he would resent the re-capture.

Instantly the arm of Queen Bess went up, and the man was covered before he could touch the revolver in his belt.

"My horse!" she said sternly and with the emphasis of flashing eyes. "I want the blood of but one man, but I may take that of another to regain my property."

"You may, eh?" sneered the rider of the girl's steed. "Do you know that thar ar' five ov us?"

"I'm perfectly aware of that, but none the less have I resolved to have my own."

"Ohol prove that this is your boss."

"Loosen the rein, and I will."

"What ef I shouldn't, Queen ov Flush Phil's ranch?"

The girl's face flushed under the infamous appellation.

"Now, sir," and she took a step toward the group, but kept her eyes riveted on the man on Flying Star. "Now, you will give up that horse within three seconds."

"That is pretty nearly right away."

"It means immediately," said the girl. "Dismount, ruffian!"

"Oh, I guess hardly, Queen of Flush Pail's paradise."

Queen Bess's lips seemed to press tighter than ever, her hand dropped a trifle lower, as if from the pard's head to his breast, then the mountain revolver spoke in language not to be misunderstood.

At the sharp report the man on Flying Star gave a howl of sudden pain and tottered in the saddle—not killed, but shot through the shoulder!

"Come here, Flying Star!" called the girl, half-hidden for a moment by the powder-smoke,

and the horse dashed toward her before a hand could detain him.

Two men leaned over from their saddles and lifted the swearing desperado from the ground, while the girl seized the bridle-rein with one hand and covered the astonished group with the weapon in the other.

"Only my rightful property—nothing more," she said, calmly. "If the man I shot will come to me I will bind up his wound. I want the life of but one man, and I will find him."

"You'd better be huntin' for another!" shot the leader of the quintette.

There was something in his voice that startled Queen Bess.

"Whar war ye last night, girl?" the tough went on.

"A prisoner."

"Then you didn't see the two Mazeppas we turned loose among the canyons?"

"No."

"Wal, they're a sight!" and the speaker showed his yellow teeth in a malicious grin.

"Who were they? You haven't dealt with the man I want, have you?" cried the girl.

"I guess we hev."

"With Bonita Ben?"

"Thunders, no! But we will when we find thet daisy galoot! We found Eldorado an' his pard last night. The pard shot Captain Leopard an' sent him down the Devil's Canyon at his horse's heels. We folleran' found him, then went back an' corralled the two pards. We lost the captain by the operation, but we made two Mazeppas just the same. So you didn't see 'em?"

"No, I have said."

"We might hev hed the gold-map, er a part ov it, afore we turned the animiles loose, but that would hev weakened one ov the pards. We tied burrs to the hosse an' they'll run themselves ter death! Twice arter we let 'em go we heard 'em in the canyons, but we hevn't heard 'em for several hours. Ooe ov them Mazeppas would surprise you ef you hevdn't heard thet yer funeral at Steeltrap City war all sham!"

"Don't give it away," said one of the men as the girl started.

"What difference does it make now?" was the retort. "The steeds can't be checked, an' the two Mazeppas, Eldorado an' his pard, ar' doomed. Tell her? Why not?"

"Tell me!" commanded Queen Bess facing the spokesman of the group. "What do you say about the burying at Steeltrap?"

"It war all a sham. Thet man warn't Fearless Frank."

A startling exclamation pealed from the girl's throat.

"In Heaven's name who was it, then?" she cried.

"You'll hev ter ask the man who sent the white hoss adrift."

"That man was Bonita Ben."

"He's somewhar in this region."

"I will find him! Then, if the headless horse-man was not Frank, the man you tied to a steed last night and sent wild through the mountains is he?"

"Mebbe so."

"I should open on you with this revolver for that detestable deed."

"It war only turn about, Queen Bess. He shot the captain."

"Where lives a man who better earned a bullet than Captain Leopard?" cried the girl. "He carried his heart on his sleeve and got it perforated—that is all."

"Well, we made a Mazeppa ov Fearless Frank for thet shootin'," flushed the ruffian. "Look a-hyer. You've got yer boss an' hev shed blood. Mebbe you'd better go an' hunt the two Mazeppas."

"I will. Woe to you men if I find him dead!"

"All right, my mountain daisy. We seldom war on women fair, but ef you throw down the gauntlet, by Jerusalem! we'll pick it up! Somehow or other Fearless hez managed ter spoil that map on his breast since we saw it last. Some infernal chemicals hev blackened the skin an' we could only make out a few lines ov the puzzle last night. Consequently we didn't try ter cut it out with our bowies."

"He should have spoiled it years ago," said Bess.

"For his own good, yes," was the reply. "The time will come, Queen Bess, when you will wish that you hed never met thet boy."

"Why?"

"B-cause the next corpse you bury will have a head an' be his."

"Woe to Captain Leopard's pards if this be so!" exclaimed the Queen of Steeltrap. "I will hound you men to your doom. I will make him the last Mazeppa that ever rode bound from your infamous clutches!"

"All right!" laughed the desperadoes, but the cachinnation was suddenly broken by the clatter of hoofs.

The whole party turned at once to the sounds, and the next second there dashed around an arm of the trail two horses upon whose backs were lashed two men!

"The Mazeppas now!" cried the mountain pards.

An instant later the horsemen guided their

steeds toward the wall, and like bounding rockets the two steeds dashed by with crimsoned nostrils, foaming flanks, and uttering wild snorts of terror!

Queen Bess saw the figure lashed to the foremost horse, and recognized it in an instant.

She saw the white skin from the belt up, the deathly eyes, and the bloodless face that rested against the charger's neck!

"My God! it is Fearless Frank!" she cried and turned her horse to pursue.

But just at that moment another horse came in sight, and all saw a stalwart fellow almost upright in the stirrups, but leaning forward a little with the noose of a black lasso in his right hand.

His eyes saw only the two horses straining every nerve to escape his cast, and he dashed between Queen Bess and the astonished pards like a flying arrow.

"I know him and I will defeat his purpose!" spoke the girl, and the following second she was riding like the wind after the sombreroed hunter of the two Mazeppas.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CALIFORNIA CLAUDE'S VICTORY.

"THET girl's a daisy an' no mistake," cried the spokesman of the five pards so suddenly deserted by the Queen of Steeltrap.

"Yes, an' ye let her ride off without givin' me a chance ter pay her back for her blood-letting," growled the fellow who had been tumbled from Flying Star's back with a shot through the shoulder.

"So we did, Nugget Noll; but yer time will come by an' by."

The wounded pard glanced at his shoulder and madly ground his teeth.

"I'll make it come!" he hissed. "By the skies above us! I'll cause her to regret her shot afore she passes in her final chips."

Meanwhile, Queen Bess was urging her steed to his utmost to overtake the two Mazeppas who were being carried over the canyon trail at a speed that seemed to endanger their horses' lives.

She saw the stalwart rider between her and the bound men, saw him leaning forward lasso in hand, eager for a successful cast.

"I have said that I would defeat his purpose, and I will!" cried the girl. "He will attempt the crime which Bonita Ben did not commit, for a desire to possess the gold-map is still the ruling passion to more than one rough man."

The steeds that carried the bound men had evidently refreshed themselves somewhere since their capture, for they dashed on with flowing manes and wild eyes, and kept beyond the ready lasso with apparent ease.

Flying Star seemed to share the young girl's eagerness.

He needed no spur points to urge him on and no words of command, for he strained himself to his utmost endeavors, and gained on the sombreroed pursuer.

The race from the first was very exciting; at times Flying Star's hoofs did not seem to strike the trail at all.

For some distance the road ran straight, but there were abrupt bends here and there, so that Bess would often lose sight of her quarry for a few moments.

All at once, as the girl rounded one of these angles, she drew rein as an exclamation of astonishment and a laugh rung in her ears.

"Found again, ho! ho! Queen Bess!" were the words that saluted her, from the lips of the man who had been pursuing the twin Mazeppas. "I did not expect to have this pleasure, but I assure you that I appreciate it."

Before he had spoken a single word the Queen of Steeltrap had recognized him.

She did not speak, but sat like a statue in the saddle with her eyes fixed upon California Claude!

"We'll let the bound pards go on," he continued. "I have found you again. That was ungrateful in you leaving me while I war faint from the man-monkey's wounds."

He had urged his steed to Flying Star's side, and while he uttered the last sentence he was looking into her face from his saddle with but little space between them.

Already the two Mazeppas had disappeared again, but the faint sound of hoofs told Queen Bess that they were still rushing on.

"Do you know those riders?" asked Claude the Pitiless.

"They are Fearless Frank and Eldorado."

"Who sent them adrift?"

"Captain Leopard's pards."

"The men I dashed by awhile back?"

"Yes."

"Whar's the captain?"

"Dead, they seem to think."

"Are they certain ov that?"

"No. When they returned to a certain place where they left him last night, he was gone."

"Which circumstance may mean a great deal," said Claude. "We'll drop this subject for the present, Bess, an' move along."

"Am your captive?" exclaimed the girl.

"No, only my pard an' companion," was the answer accompanied with a smile. "I lost you once, but I hev found you again. Pardon me

if I transfer your revolver to my belt, Queen Bess. If that's any shootin' to be done, Claude Cothard prefers doin' it himself."

The girl put her hand forward to frustrate the design the desperado had in view, but he was too quick for her, and the next instant her pistol had been transferred to his keeping.

It was the work of a moment, and the flash of resentment it called forth met only with a cool smile from the desperado.

"Never mind, California Claude," the girl's eyes said. "This is your day; to-morrow will be mine."

As the outlaw straightened from taking possession of the revolver, he seized Flying Star's bridle-rein, saying as he eyed his owner:

"We'll follow the two men, but will not chase them. If you say so, Bess, we will find them before sundown."

"You know I want to find him," she said quickly. "I know now that the headless horseman was not Frank."

"Bonita Ben knows it, too," smiled Claude.

Bess's eyes flashed at mention of that name.

"Do you know where that ruffian is?" she asked.

"I know where I left him."

"Alone?"

"Yes. We've been partners for a little while, Bess. He professes to have fathomed the mystery of the gold-map, but I do not know about that. Last night we found Comanche Jim on the trail with both arms shot to pieces."

"Justice found him soon!" ejaculated the girl as the remembrance of her adventures in the gold cavern rushed across her mind.

"Bonita an' I found Lim," Claude went on. "He got him ter talkin' about the map an' such matters an' he boasted that he had accidentally stumbled onto Don Diavolo's bonanza, which story I didn't take much stock in."

Bess did not betray by sign or speech the truth of Comanche Jim's assertion.

"It fired us up, his boast did, anyhow, Bess, an' Bonita war goin' ter force the location ov the find from him at the pistol's muzzle, when who should throw in his hand but Keno Kit."

"Captain Leopard's right bower!"

"Yes. For a moment thar promised ter be a lively time between us three tigers, but Bonita an' I walked coolly off, leavin' Comanche in Keno's hands."

"Afterward you deserted Bonita you say?" asked the girl, eagerly.

"I did."

"D-d-i?"

"Wal, no, unless a fist kills," laughed Claude.

"Oh, you knocked him out of time?"

"Kinder so, Queen Bess. I saw that we couldn't work together in harness especially when we both wanted the same thing, an' when he warn't lookin' for it I gave 'im one full in the face, an' he hit the trail harder than I struck."

"Was that good policy?" inquired Bess. "Didn't that blow make you a deadly enemy?"

"Perhaps; but what of it? A man without a deadly enemy in this country is no man at all. Thar war no other way ter dissolve our partnership. Bonita war for freezin' ter me an' why!—because I own the golden chart. So I tapped him one an' cut loose from him."

"How far back is he?" And the fair speaker glanced over her shoulder in a wishful manner.

"Never mind, you can't find him to-day. If Captain Leopard is dead, thet prophecy on the flat stone amounts to something. But I'll make a part of it a lie!"

"What prophecy do you mean?"

"The one I war takin' in when Bonita Ben came up an' we became pards. I tell you, Bess, thet the sentence concernin' me shall never be fulfilled. The stars of heaven will fade before California Claude dies in the gold-trail!"

The handsome desperado spoke with emphasis, and his deep eyes glistened as he uttered the words.

"Beware!" said the girl. "Because you have lived through ninety-nine perils, the hundredth one may finish you."

California Claude broke into a laugh.

"I'll run the risk, Bess!" he cried. "When I shall have created you Queen of Don Diavolo's new realm we'll recall the wild days of our lives among the Sierras."

"When that time comes—yes!" answered Bess, smiling.

The Curse of the Placers did not reply, but touched the girl's steed with the spur on the heel nearest him and before she could speak again they were riding side by side over the trail.

She saw the deep-seated triumph that gleamed in Claude's eyes, and in that wild moment of his victory he looked handsomer than ever, so that despite what she knew of him, the Queen of Steeltrap was forced to admire him.

Neither spoke again until they were far from the spot from where they had started on the strange ride, and then Claude the Pitiless reined in his horse suddenly with a quick glance at his prisoner.

"I see what you do," she said, in response to his look. "Let go my bridle-rein!"

"No!" and the desperado's hand closed the

tighter about it. "We will ride into this side trail an' wait for 'em."

He guided both horses into the mouth of a side track that led from the main road at that point and turned toward it with eyes full of expectancy.

They did not have to wait longer than five minutes for the spectacle they had already seen at a distance, for two horses came in sight moving along in a jaded walk, their heads drooping, and exhibiting other signs of fatigue.

An exclamation of horror passed the girl's lips.

She saw the two Mazeppas riding side by side, white-faced, and apparently lifeless!

"Merciful God! he must live despite his adventures!" she cried. "Let me go, I say!" and her hand closed madly on Claude's arm as her look seemed capable of hurling him from his saddle. "I may never get to succor him again. They are going back to Captain Leopard's human wolves."

"That's all right, Bess," he said maliciously. "The wolves will receive them with open jaws this time."

The words seemed to give the speaker immense delight.

At last he had the Queen of Steeltrap fully in his clutches.

Fearless Frank, as the young Mazeppa of the Sierra, was riding to his doom if he was not already dead.

The girl turned to follow the horses with her gaze until they disappeared, walking slowly up the trail with their unconscious burdens.

"You will not let me help him?" she asked as a last appeal.

"That wouldn't be good policy, Bess."

"Then take the consequences, merciless villain!"

Her lips closed firmly; she said no more.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE RIDE OF THE DOOMED.

As the sun set that day in a blaze of glory behind the rugged canyons of the wild gold-lands, two steeds looking almost tired to death, went slowly down a trail just wide enough to admit their walking side by side.

Each horse had a rider, not upright in the saddle, for there were no saddles, but ropes held them along the sides of the animals, and their heads were pressed against the heated necks.

They were the two men who had been submitted to torture for twenty-four hours by the seven pards of the villainous Captain Leopard whose death under the branding-iron of the masked man, has already been witnessed.

Of the hunger, the horrid thirst, the gnawing of the ropes, and the pain occasioned by the galloping of the steeds over the rocky trails, the reader will never know.

It was a sad sight, that now presented to view in the parting rays of the sun, of two men naked to the waist, pale, staring-eyed, almost dead, carried on and on by the horses, with no one to cut the knife-like cords that had buried themselves, in numerous places, in their flesh.

Then Eldorado Eph and Fearless Frank were still alive?

Alive, but in the shadow of a death terrible enough to make the bravest recoil.

The lips of the men were parched until they seemed ready to crack, their swollen tongues filled their mouths and almost prevented the utterance of a syllable.

This was what men called "California vengeance!"

The two men could not move a muscle without the greatest pain.

They had hoped for a rescue of some kind soon after being bound to the horses, but hour after hour had passed without it, and hope gave way to despair as the sun went down the sky.

Once in the narrow trail which the mountain Mazeppas struck at sundown, the two horses came so close together that the riders touched.

Instinctively they shrank from the sudden pain occasioned by the slight collision.

"Another night, Fearless," said Eldorado in a husky voice.

For a moment there was no reply.

The young miner turned his eyes slowly toward the darkening west, and sighed.

"Better cooler night than burning day," he said. "My God! Eldorado, where is all this to end?"

"Thet conundrum has puzzled me since noon, but I gave it up an hour ago," was the answer. "I guess we're elected for a ride till the ropes rot off!"

Fearless Frank ground his teeth.

"Rescue and vengeance must come sooner than that," he said. "By heavens! it shall."

"Thet's encouragin'. Who's ter fetch it about?"

The boy turned his head away.

Alas! he did not know.

"I wish a flood would break loose from the sky!" suddenly ejaculated Eldorado. "The last drink our horses took I didn't get a splashed drop. I could drink a bar'l."

"A river!" said Fearless Frank. "Gods I feel thirst gnawing at my vitals. It seldom rains in this country, they say."

"Which for us is the same as never."

The boy miner felt the terrible significance of his companion's remark.

A night without water would give the two horses riders who would never thirst again. The mountain shadows deepened, and night came on apace.

The horses crept close together, as if they liked each other's company, and the journey was kept up.

One by one the stars resumed their wonted places in the firmament, and the faintest breeze fanned the cheeks of the unfortunates, but did not possess a single refreshing quality.

The youngest of the pair had welcomed night, but it brought no relief.

The torture had become so terribly monotonous that it strangled every hopeful thought.

On, still on, down the darkened canyon trails, the saddest ride ever recorded, and the saddest riders that had ever traversed them.

After Eldorado's last remark recorded above, the two companions in misery spoke but little.

Talking even in a whisper was pain, and then it only served to keep alive the fate that stared them in the face.

There could be but one end to such a ride—death!

"I must have dreamed, Eldorado," said the young miner suddenly, and his husky voice sounded strangely in the pass. "I thought I saw Queen Bess seated on her horse as we dashed down a canyon soon after sunrise. But it could not have been the girl. She would have followed us."

Eldorado, who started at Frank's words, gave him a singular look before he replied:

"Ov course it was not Bess," he said, although his eyes belied his words. "It must bev been a dream, Fearless."

"Yes, a dream," and the miner shut his eyes and rode on a mile without another utterance.

"I saw her, too, but I daren't tell him," said Eldorado under his breath. "It would make him hope, an' when rescue did not come, he'd go wild over the girl's absence. Why didn't she foller us! It's a mystery to me. Mebbe, arter all, she has gone back to California Claude."

When the gold-hater turned to look at his companion, he saw what he took for a sleeping person.

"Sleep at last!" the old fellow ejaculated, well pleased. "He'll forget much with his eyes shut, but he may waken at a feast or drinkin' a river dry! I'll not go off that way. Suthin' may happen soon an' one ov us oughter be wide awake."

So Eldorado Eph resolved to watch while Fearless Frank slumbered.

It was a mournful picture, that of that hungry man watching his young companion as their jaded steeds carried them on and on, deeper than ever into the canyon region.

Fearless Frank slept for more than two hours, watched all the time by his friend.

Not a sound had been heard to break his slumbers, and Eldorado hoped that he would wake refreshed.

"Water! water! Ah! isn't it glorious!" cried the young miner as he suddenly opened his eyes. "Scoop it in, Eldorado! there's enough here to supply a herd of buffaloes. Cold as ice, too! I could drink the river dry!"

These words sounded wildly in the canyon where not a drop of water was visible, and soon after the last one a deep sigh welled from Eldorado's heart.

"Water! water! why don't you shout, Eldorado!" continued Fearless Frank.

Eldorado Eph could not reply; speech seemed to cleave his tongue.

It was delirium, the approach of madness!

He turned his head toward the miner and saw a strange glitter in his eyes.

"I hear water, Eldorado! I bear a cataract, I say!"

An exclamation burst from the mountain pauper's throat.

"By Jehu! so do I!" he cried.

It was evident that the horses had also caught a welcome sound for they pricked up their ears and increased their speed.

All at once they turned into a wider trail at the termination of the little canyon, and began to descend as if toward a valley.

The sounds increased in volume until the presence of a waterfall somewhere could no longer be disputed.

Eldorado turned his head despite the cord which seemed to cut into his neck, and strained his eyes ahead.

Suddenly he saw a strange glitter and then uttered a cry of genuine joy.

The rising moon was shining on a waterfall!

The sight was as if the gates of Paradise had opened to the two Mazeppas.

The horses acknowledged the presence of water with many equine manifestations of delight, and a few moments later rushed down the trail and plunged into the river just below the fall.

At first they went in flank deep, then pushed

on until, striking a sudden offset, they disappeared completely!

When they came to the surface loud cries of thankfulness burst from the throats of their riders.

"By Jove! that's a river ov Paradise!" cried Eldorado. "I kin go on a thousand miles on the draught I've had."

There was no reply from Fearless Frank.

The young miner's face was no longer in the old position the ropes had kept it since dawn; his body had changed position, and while Eldorado looked he saw Frank fall almost intot he water!

"What does that mean?" he exclaimed.

He was not fully answered until he saw Fearless Frank hanging from his steed's mane, and gasping while the animals were swimming through the cool current toward the opposite bank.

As Frank's horse emerged from the element the youth dropped to the ground and looked up at his speechless companion.

"There was a razor rock under the water where my horse went down," he said between his breath. "The beginning of the end has come, Eldorado. Wait till I get a little strength; then I'll loosen your bonds."

The answer was a wild shout of triumph.

"Hurrah for the rock!" the mountain pauper cried. "Now, my seven-devil pards, look out! Eldorado an' Fearless Frank ar' Mazeppas no longer. We'll find the old trail an' pay what we owe ye with compound int'rest!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

FEARLESS FRANK PAYS OLD DEBTS.

YES, on the bank of the unknown river the terrible ride had terminated.

One hour after reaching it the two horses were moving on again, but this time their riders were not lashed Mazeppa-like to their backs.

Eldorado Eph still watched his young companion with a great deal of anxiety.

The ride was painful still, but not so terrible as it had been, and the two pards ground their teeth when they recalled the sufferings they had lately endured.

The cool waters had quenched their consuming thirst, and washed the cuts inflicted by the ropes tied by inhuman hands; still they were by no means res'ored.

Side by side the two men rode on, with the cataract behind them; stars went down the glittering trails of the sky, and the winds of midnight added to their comfort.

"I long ter reach 'em!" growled Eldorado with a glance at Fearless Frank.

"Your desire is no greater than mine," was the answer. "I have endured a thousand deaths within the last thirty-six hours. Vengeance, I'm afraid, can inflict on those infamous villains but one."

"Wait till we find 'em an' see," answered Eph. "I've tramped the trails ov California these many years, an' I've picked up a little originality byer an' thar."

The young miner understood his companion and said no more.

They were going back over the trail they had lately traversed in the role of Mazeppas, without a weapon of any kind, yet burning for revenge.

If the banded pards could have seen their bleeding bodies, their wild eyes, and how they tottered at times in their seats, they would have given sound to laughs of derision.

All at once Fearless Frank fell forward on his steed's neck, and Eldorado observed with a smile that sleep had again overcome him.

The mountain trail was now smooth, so that the slumbers of the fatigued boy were not disturbed, and his faithful friend watched him with much solicitude.

"Hello!" suddenly rung out a clear voice, and Eldorado Eph turned to see a horse and his rider so near that he could have touched them with his hand.

"What has happened?" continued the same voice.

"My God! don't you know?" cried Eldorado; and then seeing that his companion's deep sleep had not been broken, he suddenly lowered his tones. "We're just gettin' over the infernalest ride two pards ever took. We've been playin' Mazeppa."

"Jehosaphat! I should say ye hev, from the look ov yer bodies!" and the speaker leaned forward with curiosity and astonishment intermingled in his keen eyes. "Who tied yer to them hoses?"

"Who but the meanest villains on earth?"

"California an' Bonita!"

"No; thar's men just as mean as they ar', Keno."

"Who ar' they?"

"Captain Leopard's mountain imps. I don't keer so much for myself, but for that youngster yonder. Me an' him ar' pards ter the death. I'll stand by Fearless Frank through thick an' thin!"

"Is that Frank?"

"That's the boss boy ov California."

The man, who was Keno Kit, urged his steed toward the young miner, still asleep on his

horse, and put out his hand toward him, when Eldorado suddenly seized his wrist.

"What would you do, Keno?" he asked.

"Nothin' ter hurt him," was the reply, as the eyes of the two men met. "I've got an idea, as I may hev told you, what Captain Leopard meant when he said that eight from twenty-one leaves thirteen. I only wanted ter satisfy myself."

"Can't ye do it without rousing the kid?"

"I'll try."

Softly the bronzed hand of Keno Kit felt its way under Frank's chin, and gently lifted his head.

The features that he revealed to the soft light of the young moon and her attendant stars were pale, and bore traces of that ride of suffering through the mountains. They were enough to call forth expressions of pity from hearts of stone.

So gently did Keno Kit perform his office that Fearless Frank's sleep was not broken, and after gazing searching into the youth's face for a few moments, he allowed him to resume his old position.

"Wall!" began Eldorado, when the ex-member of Captain Leopard's band turned to him again.

"I'm satisfied. If it warn't for disturbin' him, I'd like ter take the youngster in my arms."

"You would, eh?" cried Eldorado as he started. "What is Fearless Frank to you?"

"More than you think, Eldorado," was the answer, which instead of satisfying only increased the mountain pauper's curiosity. "I've follied Captain Leopard for ten years, hunted with him an' fought for him, without dreamin' that he knew anything about—"

Keno Kit caught himself at the door of a secret and suddenly paused.

Eldorado said nothing, but looking him in the eye, waited for him to proceed.

"I may be mistaken after all, but I don't think I am," he went on, after a pause. "I see in Frank's features, smitten with pain as they ar', a face I saw just twenty years ago. Whar did you say you war goin'?"

The question was put so suddenly that Eldorado recoiled.

In asking it, Keno Kit's voice had entirely changed.

"We war ridin' back ter vengeance, ov course," said Eldorado.

"I'll go along."

"Just as you like, Keno."

"I owe a debt to the man who made that boy suffer."

Eldorado Eph looked at the speaker, but made no reply.

He saw Keno Kit place himself on the other side of the sleeping boy, so that he was between them, and then signify by a look that he was ready to move on.

"Time an'a canyon trail will bring us face to face with the villains," said Eldorado, as the horses started forward.

Keno nodded without taking his eyes from Fearless Frank.

Three hours later the two men suddenly drew rein and looked into one another's faces.

"Found!" ejaculated Eldorado.

Nobody confronted them, yet certain voices told them that they had come up with a family of night-hawks that had not retired to perches since sundown.

"Stay back till we come," said Keno, in low tones to Fearless Frank, now wide awake, and listening with flashing eyes to the voices of men not far away.

"You will not let me have a hand in the settlement?" he said.

"Yes, we will. Eldorado an' I ar' only goin' forward on a spyan' expedition. We want ter get the lay ov the land, that's all."

"Promise me that."

"We do, Fearless," said Keno, solemnly, as his hand dropped on the boy's knee.

There was no answer on the young miner's part, for at that moment a boisterous laugh rung out, and the trio heard the words that followed it:

"Another hand like that, an' I'll sweep in the second quarter. Shuffle the deck, Modoc!"

Keno turned to his companions and smiled.

"They're playin' for Don Diavolo's bonanza before they've touched a single nugget," he said in low tones.

"Countin' their chicks afore the shells hev been pecked," grinned Eldorado. "Play on, my daisies. Thar's a thunder-cloud over yer heads that's likely ter burst at any minute."

Again the laugh of a mountain gambler rung out boisterously, and Eldorado and Keno Kit slid from their horses leaving Fearless Frank alone.

The young miner watched them till they disappeared, and then began to wait for their return.

The voices of the unseen players indicated that the men themselves were not more than a hundred yards distant, and just around an abrupt angle formed by a tremendous boulder that bent the trail.

"I wonder whar ther two Mazeppas ar' ter night!" suddenly cried one of the gamblers.

"I could answer that question, ruffian!" slipped like the hiss of a serpent between Fearless Frank's teeth. "In a little while, if I am not mistaken, I will answer it to my satisfaction if not to yours!"

He waited ten minutes for his companions' return, but was not rewarded.

"This is torture itself!" he suddenly exclaimed. "If they are taking in the mountain game why should not I?"

At that moment, as if to deceive him, he heard this outburst of devilish malignity:

"I fixed the ropes so they'd cut the kid's hide! They're to the bone by this time, dead or alive. On, Mountain Jules hez made men Mazeppas before."

"Mountain Jules, eh? Is that the name you bear?" exclaimed Fearless Frank.

A moment later he was on the ground slipping toward the big boulder in whose shadow, though he saw them not, crouched Keno Kit and Eldorado Eph.

The boy had taken the opposite side of the trail, and his eagerness to see the man who had spoken last hurried him forward.

All at once he came upon the wild scene that occupied a certain part of the canyon.

A flaring torch stuck in a crevice of the stone wall threw a strong light over the five desperadoes who had made a rough card-table out of planks found in a deserted cabin not fifty yards from the spot.

They had determined to make a night of it previous to resuming their hunt for the lost gold-mine and were, as Keno Kit had rightly guessed, playing away the divide before their hands had clutched a single nugget.

Spellbound for a moment, Fearless Frank gazed on the striking tableau. He knew the faces of all, for at one time in his life history, as the reader knows, he had been Captain Leopard's prisoner.

"Which is Mountain Jules?" he asked anxiously under his breath. "I'd like to have that particular friend pointed out to me."

He crept forward until, at a risk of exposing himself, he halted within forty feet of the gamblers.

"You're in luck, Jules!" exclaimed one of the gold-pards as the discolored cards were thrown across the rough table to be shuffled for a new deal.

"Kinder so!" was the answer. "Ef I keep on at this rate, I'll be sole owner ov Don Diavolo's wealth!"

Fearless Frank almost sprung to his feet.

He knew now which one was Mountain Jules, the inhuman monster who had lashed him to the back of the horse.

"All's not gold that glitters, demon!" he said. "This night—now—I'll show you that nearer than you think is payment with interest for that torture-ride!"

The young miner of Steeltrap seemed to forget the terrible odds against him, or if he measured them he did not fear.

All at once he started toward the canyon table.

As his figure passed into the circle of light furnished by the torch in the rocky wall, Eldorado and Keno Kit rose to their feet.

"Jerusalem! the boy!" they ejaculated, and their hands flew to their weapons, Eldorado's to the revolver loaned by his friend.

But Fearless Frank kept straight ahead, and all at once he appeared at the table and faced the thunderstruck group with the ferocity of a tiger!

"I'll pay you for that ride now, Mountain Jules!" he hissed, and before the ruffian addressed could draw, the young miner of Steeltrap was charging across the table at his throat!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE HALF-WAY DUEL.

THE wonderful fearlessness and audacity of the young Mazeppa held Keno Kit and Eldorado spellbound for a second in the shadow of the gigantic rock.

They saw the villain's companions start back with looks of surprise, and with exclamations of amazement, they saw the table tumble to the ground, but not before Fearless Frank had left it and had his left hand under Mountain Jules's chin!

It seemed the work of a single second.

Forced back against the canyon wall, and under the torch, the attacked ruffian did not collect his scattered senses until he felt the vise-like pressure of the youth's hand.

Frank was hanging to his throat like a wolf hangs to the throat of a deer!

"Tear 'im loose! He'll throttle Jules ter death!" rung from the gold-pards' throats.

As the men recovered, there was a rush to the rescue, but just then the revolvers of the two pards by the boulder opened in good earnest, and several of the ruffians went backward to drop across the trail, shot dead!

This, too, was the work of an incredibly short space of time.

Keno Kit and Eldorado fired as they came on and ere they reached the spot where Frank was struggling with his enemy, four human figures lying in the torchlight told that as a band Cap-

tain Leopard's men would appear no more in mountain history.

Keno Kit reached Fearless Frank in time to prevent Mountain Jules from securing an advantage which might have proved disastrous to the young miner.

It was with difficulty that the twain were separated, and Jules found himself covered by Eldorado's revolver over whose barrel glanced a pair of eyes that gave him no assurances of mercy.

"Whar's ther rest ov yer pards?" asked Keno Kit of Mountain Jules.

"Five ov 'em fell when Californy Claude robbed Captain Leopard ov the gold-map at the Devil's Stair. I don't know whar the captain himself is. Sardine and Jack ar' deserters—like yerself, Keno."

Keno Kit did not resent the accusation, but allowed a smile to appear at the corners of his mouth.

"It's the fulfillin' ov the prophecy," he said.

"What prophecy?" asked Jules.

"The one I accidentally read on a stone last night."

"What war it, Keno?"

"It said that Captain Leopard an' all his pards should die on the gold-trail."

"Including you?"

"My name war specially mentioned."

"Good," snarled Mountain Jules.

"The captain's already dead."

"Dead!"

"Dead, with the gold-map burned into his breast."

"Who did it?"

"A man ov mystery who didn't give me a chance ter ask him any questions. You an' I, Jules, ar' the last ov the old band."

"I stayed with the captain till the last. No, we're not the last. You forget Sardine an' Jack. They deserted shortly arter we took Eldorado an' thet youngster from the cave."

"Which way did they go?"

"Back toward the cave. Wal, my boy, how did my ropes cut!"

Mountain Jules had suddenly turned and addressed his question to Fearless Frank.

The boy's eyes flashed.

"Like knives, you infamous hound!" he exclaimed, stepping toward Jules until stopped and pushed back by Keno's hand. "I did not get to settle with you, but the settlement will yet be made."

"I promise you that, Fearless," said Eldorado, who had no love for the mountaineer who had tied his prison cords as well. "I have a little account with this night-hawk. I carry the marks of his beak on my body."

"Of course," said Jules. "We hed ter send ye both away together; ye war pards."

There was no answer to this.

Keno Kit took the torch from the wall and turned to Eldorado.

"Do you know whar we ar'?" he asked.

The old gold-hater surveyed their surroundings for a moment and replied:

"Hang me ef we ain't nigher the old startin' place than I thought. Our bosses must bev carried us round an' round almost in a circle."

"Can you go to the rent in the wall—to the scene ov your capture by Jules an' his pards?"

"I don't know," was the doubtful answer.

"Can you, Jules?"

"No; if I knew the way you pards wouldn't bev found us byer playin' for the shares in the big bonanza. We'd bev gone back long ago arter Sardine an' Jack."

"What do you say, Frank?"

"I fear I couldn't lead you back. This place is strange to me. We will have to trust Eldorado's memory if we must go back."

"I want to go tbar. Eldorado, we'll try you."

"Thar's nothin' like tryin', pards," smiled the old Californian. "Back to the bosses. We'll make the effort."

"Am I ter tramp it?" asked Mountain Jules at this juncture.

"No; whar's yer boss?"

"Within a stone's throw, ef all that shootin' didn't scare him."

Five minutes later the little party started up the trail, leaving the dead men and their lost cards lying promiscuously under the towering walls of the wild canyon.

Mountain Jules's arms were lashed to his sides, but his hands were free to hold the lines.

Eldorado and Frank had covered their nakedness with jackets taken from the dead desperadoes left behind, so that the two Mzeppas were once more clothed, if their wounds were still painful.

Eldorado seemed to gain confidence in himself as they advanced, and at last an exclamation of triumph parted the young miner's lips.

"Well done, Eldorado!" he exclaimed. "We are here!"

Mountain Jules gave their surroundings a glance of recognition, and Eldorado pointed forward as he turned to Keno Kit.

"I didn't fail, did I, Keno?" he said. "Thar's the gap in the wall from which they dragged Fearless an' I t'other night. Ar' we ter occupy it?"

"We are," said Keno. "Mountain Jules, isn't this a good place ter settle difficulties?"

Instantly a change took place in the desperado's countenance.

"That's what ye've just remarked," he snapped. "My biggest account is with that boy."

"Ay, that it is!" cried Fearless Frank. "I know of no man I hate worse than I do you, unless it be Bonita Ben."

"The man what palmed a corpse off on Queen Bess for you, eh?" laughed Jules.

"That's the villain!" grated the youth.

"Wal, Keno, if thar's any difficulty ter be settled byer, map out ther programme," Jules said as he turned to Keno Kit who had just said a few whispered words to Eldorado.

Before he could reply he felt a hand on his arm and turning half-way round in his saddle he looked into the eager and anxious face of Fearless Frank.

"I'll fight him any way, big as he is," the youth said. "He doesn't deserve exactly fair play, Keno, but I'll give it. I'll fight him the way they fight in the Sonora camps, saddle to saddle with bowies, and one hand tied on the back; or, I'll face him the old Texan way."

"How's that?" asked Jules.

"Revolvers at five paces."

"The last way strikes me. But how many am I ter fight?"

"That chick thar," said Eldorado pointing to Frank. "He's doin' bizness for me just now."

"All right, then. Set me face ter face with the youngster an' throw a little light on the subject."

Keno Kit proceeded to make a torch which he lit with a lucifer, and in a little while had a flame that promised to afford light sufficient for the mountain duel.

The night was on the wane, and the moon no longer shed a silvery effulgence on the trail.

The preliminaries did not occupy any useless time.

Mountain Jules's arms were set free, and the revolver held by Keno was placed in his hands.

"Remember, that after the fight, the shooter comes back to me," he whispered to his old pard.

"All right, Keno. I'll toss it back afore I ride off."

"Mebbe so," said Eldorado under his breath, for his quick ears had caught the conversation. "I've seen Fearless shoot in Steeltrap. He's quicker than thought!"

Keno Kit reposed much confidence in the youth from the looks he gave him as Eldorado led his horse the settled distance and turned him toward his antagonist.

The old gold-hater held the torch alongside the trail and midway between the night duelists.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready we ar'," said Jules.

"I shall drop my hat," said Eldorado holding out a sombrero. "When it leaves my hand—shoot!"

The two persons who had poked their weapons forward sat bolt upright, and seemed to watch each other and the hat at the same time.

"Hands up thar, every mother's son ov ye!" suddenly thundered a stentorian voice. "I'll take a deadly hand in that fight myself if I'm not obeyed. Hands up, er die!"

"Jehosaphat!" ejaculated Eldorado wheeling half-way round. "Who's sp'ilin' our game?"

"The only man in California who has a right to!" was the answer.

"Come forward an' show yerself."

"Here I am!"

The following moment Eldorado's torch revealed a man sitting bolt upright in his saddle, but his face was masked to below his mouth.

"The man what branded the captain!" cried Keno Kit.

"I gave him the map he wanted, sure enough. I declare this duel off. Gentlemen, you're standin' within thirty yards of Don Diavolo's bonanza, an' two ov ye ar' to die without touchin' a nugget!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TWO SHOTS AND TWO DEAD MEN.

SLOWLY riding through the mountain with the sun in his face, a well-built, dark-faced man whose horse in strength and contour matched him well.

"I guess I'll bev ter paddle my own canoe arter this," he said, speaking aloud the thoughts uppermost in his mind. "Californy an' I didn't stay pards long. He knocked me headlong from the saddle when I war least expectin' a blow ov the kind. Curse him! afore he dies he'll wish thet instead ov a fist he bad given Bonita Ben a bullet."

How malignant grew the countenance of the speaker as the last sentence passed his lips; and how madly flashed the eyes that always gleamed behind their fringe of jet-black lashes like the orbs of the hooded cobra!

Once more Bonita Ben from Steeltrap found himself alone on the gold trail with no partner, but with the mysterious map no longer a great puzzle to his brain.

"Hang me ef thet blow didn't about supply the missin' link," he continued in a laughing strain. "I see clearer now than ever before, thanks ter yer fist, Californy. Hol let me see what it looks like just now."

He rode up to a large flat rock that formed a part of the wall of the narrow canyon he had just entered, and took from his pocket a whitish substance that resembled a lump of chalk.

Leaning toward the wall from the saddle, he began to trace a number of lines on the rock, and did not rise to contemplate his work until he had perfected from memory alone a good counterfeit of the mysterious gold map.

"Thar she is! not a line, not a cross missin'!" exclaimed the gold-hunter as he surveyed his work with much satisfaction. "That's what comes ov bevin' a good memory. Now, hyer goes the line thar always puzzled me, runnin' like a mountain creek up ter this p'int, whar it moves to the right an' stops—hyer!"

Bonita Ben had followed the line indicated by moving his finger over his map, and at the spot where it rested he gazed reflectively for some time.

"I b'lieve I could go straight toward the bonanza!" he suddenly ejaculated. "I'm no fool, however. I'll not attempt ter seek it till I kin do it without bein' watched. Not while Californy Claude, Eldorado an' the rest ov 'em ar' on the same trail."

The next moment he leaned toward his work again, and with several dashes of his swarthy hand across the surface of the stone entirely obliterated the diagram.

"Rock printin' tells tales," he said with a smile, "so I'll just erase mine. Thar! I've left nothin' legible for the spy to tell may come after me."

He bestowed a final look on the rock and then rode on.

Bonita's face still showed the effects of the blow unexpectedly received at California Claude's hands.

The desperado's knuckles had left mementoes in the shape of abrasions which several days would hardly obliterate, and these, of course, angered Bonita Ben whenever he felt them.

"I'd like ter meet you, Californy," he said more than once as he let his horse go over the trail at his own gait. "I'd like ter see the boy, too. Tbet headless corpse bizness worked like a charm, but Fearless Frank finally put an end to the thing by escapin' from the prison I hed fixed for him. I war lucky ter find that young gold-hunter in the mountains an' when my lasso dropped over his head I knew I hed a pretty good substitute for Frank, although I hed ter send him adrift among ther hills without a head. Juez the Greaser drew off the tattoo chart for me, an' he war about ter give the hull game away ter Queen Bess when I dropped him at her feet. Oh, I play a bad game when I've made up my mind ter win!"

And Bonita Ben chuckled his delight in audible tones. "I'll get thar first ov all in spite ov the ten thousand who want ter be ahead ov me."

About a quarter of a mile ahead ov Bonita and advancing toward him over the same trail which was so pliant that it sent forth no sound of hoofs were two riders, California Claude and Queen Bess of Steeltrap.

A meeting was unavoidable, and that within very few minutes.

The girl seemingly had become quite reconciled to her fate, for she rode beside Claude the Pitiless wholly unbound and with her hands at liberty.

There was a pleasant mountain breeze, stiff enough to elevate the brim of Claude's sombrero, and to toy with the long hairs of his dark mustache.

"So you will not tell me where it is?" he said, smilingly, as he looked at Bess.

"I will not," was the quiet but firmly-spoken answer.

"You keep the secret for Fearless Frank, eh? You think thet he will live to tell how he an' Eldorado Eph played Mazeppa in the canyon district of the Sierra Nevada?"

"I do not know that I would disclose the location of the mine even to him."

The handsome desperado laughed.

"Come, Bess, don't attempt to stuff me with such pastry," he exclaimed. "Not tell Fearless Frank whar Don Diavolo's dust is?—why not, my mountain queen?"

"Because it is accursed; it has been the cause of enough bloodshed already. If it had never existed you would not have made Flush Phil's place a slaughter-pen."

"Why, don't you know, Bess, that that little episode was the result of a bet? You bet your ring against my hat an' I won, ha! ha!"

"I know," said the girl, quickly; "but the gold-mine was the cause of your comin' to Steeltrap that night."

"Perhaps."

"It has cost the greater part of Captain Leo-pard's band their lives."

"That's some good it's done" said Claude.

"It caused the death of Comanche Jim."

"Your persecutor! Wal, Bess, you haven't dropped any tears over that galoot's grave."

The girl made no reply.

"I didn't lure him to it, anyway," she said, several moments later seeing that her companion was waiting for an answer of some kind.

"Mebbe not," he said. "Ef the prophecy ov ther stone is correct, none ov us ar' ter get thar."

"Do you know who wrote it there?"

"A masked man who has made himself mighty conspicuous an' officious throughout California ov late years."

"Is that all you know about him?"

"That's all I want ter know at present. One ov these days, Queen Bessie, I'll make him disclose his identity an' then, we'll know—"

"Whoa! Jehosaphat!"

At this sudden interruption California Claude turned from the girl and looked ahead.

The horses had just rounded an abrupt curve in the trail, and the Curse of the Placers with his beautiful captive found themselves face to face with no less a personage than Bonita Ben.

In an instant the eyes of the two men flashed sparks of rage, and their hands darted toward the deadly weapons of the gold-lands.

"Hold, gentlemen!" cried Queen Bess, and while her voice still sounded she spurred her horse forward and halted midway between the two late pards of the gold-bills.

Her quick eyes had foreseen a desperate engagement.

She heard the click of revolver-locks as she halted between the enemies, and her interposition darkened Bonita Ben's face.

"You sha'n't interfere, pretty as you ar', girl!" he hissed. "What I owe the galoot behind you, can't be calculated upon paper. It's a debt that kin be settled only with revolvers er bowies. Do you know that we war pards a few hours ago?"

"I know; but that's not why I interfere, Bonita Ben. Have you forgotten the murderous deception practiced on me?"

"Thet headless corpse bizness?" grinned the brute from Steeltrap.

"It was made the more villainous by the infamous murder perpetrated to carry out the scheme!" flashed the fearless girl. "Its after results hold you accountable for the deeds committed by Captain Leopard's pards. They have sent him, the boy, through the wolf-haunted canyons lashed to the back of a burr-adorned steed only half-broken. If you had not played your rascally game, Bonita Ben, he would not be playing somewhere at this hour the terrible role of Maz-ppa. I have hunted you ever since I buried in Steeltrap a mutilated body supposed to be his. I swore, under the stars that shine on that mountain camp, that I would track you down and pay you for that villainous trick. I do not know that I should stay my hand because the headless rider of the white horse was not Frank. Through you he rides another steed to-day, perhaps dead."

"That was his own lookout," grated Bonita Ben. "Why didn't he keep out of the pards' clutches?"

"No braggadocio!" admonished the Queen of Steeltrap, in tones that had not abated in sternness since her last words. "As you have not actually shed his blood I will not strike you down; but the man at my back shall meet you in any manner you desire. Bonita Ben, this is your late partner and friend, California Claude!"

As the mountain beauty concluded she pulled her horse to one side, and waved her hand at Claude the Pitiless, as her action brought the two men face to face.

"Now, gentlemen," she went on, "I hope there will be no compromise between you this time. I am armed myself, as you see, thanks to my friend California, whose trust at times, especially when he thinks his triumph is complete, is amazing, and I will shoot the man who proposes a partnership."

For several moments after the girl had finished the two desperadoes sat motionless on their horses, glaring at each other like tigers of the jungle brought suddenly face to face on some old battle-ground.

They were about ten yards apart, and the sunlight that filled the canyon rendered the tableau displayed the more striking.

Queen Bess looked on with a pleased expression on her interesting features.

California Claude and Bonita Ben, two of the most heroic hunters of Don Diavolo's golden tomb, and uncompromising enemies now, were face to face, the right hand of each at the butt of a revolver, and gleams of human tigerism in the depths of their eyes.

Could a minute flit by without a desperate collision?

"Why don't they fight?" murmured the girl. "Are they going to see whether I will keep my threat to shoot the first compromiser?"

All at once California Claude spoke in tones that settled the mental question.

"If it's ter be fight, Bonita Ben, I'm at yer service," he exclaimed. "I shall give that beauty no cause to whirl me dead from my saddle. I could hev killed you instead ov breakin' yer skin with my fist—"

"Why didn't you do it?" flung out Bonita Ben in a hiss. "When you hev a chance ter catch a rattler, why do you let it get away?"

Up an' defend yerself, Californy. I'm quicker'n a cat!"

Queen Bess saw the two huge revolvers that leaped into the air at the end of Bonita Ben's last sentence.

That mountain combat was to have no preliminaries; snap-shots were to settle the difficulties between the two men.

She held her breath and looked, hardly for a second.

Suddenly there rung out a loud report, which was, indeed, the sound of two revolvers.

Queen Bess saw California Claude reel backward, and at the same time Bonita Ben dropped his smoking weapon and clutched the dark mane of his steed!

"Both hit!" rushed through the girl's mind.

At that instant the Curse of the Placers fell, and as he struck the ground his antagonist fell half-way from his saddle!

Queen Bess instinctively started forward, and drew rein over the spot where the handsome desperado lay.

"A dead shot sure enough," she said, after one glance at the whitened face upturned for her inspection. "Steeltrap has been avenged by the pistol of one of her outlawed citizens."

Yes, on the trail he would ride no more lay California Claude!

He had spared the life of a man whom he had no right to trust, and as one of the ten thousand who wanted to find the lost bonanza, he lay dead almost within its shadow.

While the Queen of Steeltrap sat spellbound over the dead sport a dull thud suddenly started her, and she turned in time to see Bonita Ben land on the ground under his horse's feet!

"Wiped-out!" he gasped. "Euchered within a mile ov the big bonanza!"

The young girl sprung from her horse and rushed to the Steeltrapper's side, but ere she reached it he raised his body half-up, gave a loud cry, and sunk back—dead!

"What else could have happened?" said Queen Bess. "They were both dead shots."

The following moment she noticed something white protruding from Bonita Ben's pocket, and the next instant she held it in her hand—a piece of chalk.

"It is left for me to write their epitaphs!" she exclaimed, advancing toward the almost polished rocks that formed at that point the walls of the mountain pass.

The sun shone upon the large flat rock selected by the girl for the inscription, and a minute later she had written this:

"CALIFORNIA CLAUDE!

"BONITA BEN!

"Died here by each other's hands on the trail to Don Diavolo's dust!"

Having finished her work, the girl stepped back and surveyed it, pronouncing it perfect, then turned toward the dead men's horses.

These she stripped of their accoutrements, which she placed beside their respective owners, and then turned away.

"Stay with your dead masters, or live from now on a life of freedom—just as you choose," she said, with a glance at the two steeds as she remounted her own. "As for me, I have seen this place, where two life-hunts have ended, for the last time."

She gave her horse line and a touch of the spur, and rode from the place with but one glance back at its strange tenants.

Within a few feet of one another lay the men whose great ambition in life was to enrich themselves by the discovery of wealth which tradition and an old diagram said had been buried for more than one hundred years.

That hunt had engendered passions and animosities which could end only at the muzzles of mountain pistols.

Better for California Claude and Bonita Ben if they had never heard of Don Diavolo's tomb; better for the peace of mind of the thousands of others whose quest was the same.

As for Queen Bess, she rode over the tragic trail with apparently no special object in view.

She was Claude's prisoner no longer, and as she rode on, a resolution of firmness lit up her eyes.

"I will find him!" she said. "Where he is, dead or alive, my hunt will end. Fortune has taken me to the gold-cave, but fate has robbed me of my best friend. May I find the young Mazeppa alive!"

She did not draw rein until her horse had recognized with a whinny the famous rent in the wall, the opening that eventually led to Don Diavolo's dust.

"Why not enter and see whether Colonel Sardine and Major Jack, the two ruffians whom I left in possession of the place, succeeded in effecting their escape?" said the Queen of Steeltrap, and the next moment in she went.

"Who's that?" suddenly rung out a voice in the darkness; it sent the girl's hand toward her pistol.

She did not get it fairly drawn before a hand clutched her arm.

"By Jove! a woman! Is it Queen Bess?"

"Yes," said the girl. "Who are you?"

"One ov the thirty pards ov Steeltrap that hev concluded ter take a hand in the hunt fer that gigantic bonanza."

"Have you found it?"

"Not yet, Bess."

A thrill passed over the girl's frame.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A MYSTERY MADE CLEAR.

LET US go back a step in our romance of the gold-lands to take up the thread of narrative broken by the account of the death of the two desperadoes in the girl's presence.

The man in the mask, it will be recollected, appeared on a certain spot in time to interrupt a duel between Mountain Jules of Captain Leopard's band, and Fearless Frank.

A moment of tardiness on the mysterious one's part would have proved too late, and one of the enemies, perhaps both, as in the scene just witnessed, might have fallen before the revolver's muzzle.

The masked one had avowed himself as the person who had burned into Captain Leopard's breast the gold-map which had caused his death, for, weakened as the captain was by his late terrible experience, he could not survive this last fearful experience.

Fearless Frank looked at the Unknown one with no pleasant sensations.

He looked upon him as an interferer who had stepped between him and vengeance.

He had heard something of a man of this kind, but this was the first time they stood face to face.

Mountain Jules did not relish the interference.

He probably thought that he was about to get rid of the young miner by driving a bullet through his head.

After that, he could go back to the gold-trail, although alone, for had not Eldorado Eph declared that Frank, while fighting his own battles in the present case, fought also for him?

"You will lower your weapons, gentlemen," continued the stranger. "This duel is off forever."

"We'll see about that," said Fearless Frank under his breath. "You may interfere successfully this time, but when next I meet Mountain Jules, if he gets off now, I will pay him for that torture-ride."

"What war thet you said about bein' nigh Don Diavolo's gold?" suddenly asked Keno Kit.

"I said that you men are within thirty yards of it."

"No!" fell from more pairs of lips than one.

"I speak the truth."

"Hey you got the map?"

"Yes, I've carried it for thirty years—here!" And the speaker jerked open his jacket and displayed his naked breast. "You can't see it well from where you are," he went on; "but it is Don Diavolo's gold-map, all the same!"

"Who put it on your breast?" exclaimed Fearless Frank, leaping from his horse and rushing up to the living mystery. "I have its duplicate upon my skin. What do you know about it?"

The eyes under the mask appeared to twinkle as they became riveted on the eager boy who looked up into them burning for a reply.

It did not come in words for some moments.

The strange man leaned forward and began a study of the youth's features, watched eagerly by the three spectators near, but closest of all by Keno Kit.

"I'll probably find out soon why eight from twenty-one leave thirteen," this worthy muttered. "If I'm not mistaken, I'm at the end ov a trail."

All at once the hand of the Unknown came down on Fearless Frank's shoulder, and seemed to impart an indescribable magnetism that almost lifted him from the ground.

Frank waited for an answer to his question concerning the placing of the tattoo on his own breast.

"I put it there, boy," said the man in the mask solemnly. "It was thirteen years ago."

He did not speak more than a degree above a whisper but Keno Kit heard him.

"Did you do it, Hidden Face?" he suddenly ejaculated, and the next moment he leaped from the saddle and came toward the Unknown. "If you speak the truth, then you can tell me who thet boy is. Captain Leopard set me ter thinkin' when he said one night thet eight from twenty-one left thirteen. Now tell me what he meant. He died before I got ter ask him the second time."

The eyes of the two men met in the light of the torch which Keno Kit held in his hand.

"You, I believe, are called Keno Kit?" said the mask.

"Thet's my handle."

"Of Captain Leopard's gang of gold-wolves?"

"Yes! Yonder sits the only other one left—save two deserters—ov the original pack," and Keno's outstretched hand designated Mountain Jules.

"It is recorded that every member of the band shall perish in the gold-trail."

"So I understand," said Kit with a fearless

flashing of his dark eyes, and he seemed to increase an inch in stature.

"Well, sir, go back and die like a man," the Unknown said.

"Not till I know about the youngster byer. You gave him the gold-map, you say?"

"I did."

"Thirteen years ago?"

"Yes."

"Warn't that about the time the Santa Fe stage war plundered an' a young woman killed?"

"Do you know about that?"

"Yes."

"Who are you?"

It was a curious question for the man in the mask, for at that moment he was scrutinizing Keno Kit's features with all the perceptive powers at his command.

"Keno Kit, I guess," grinned the mountain outlaw. "I've had an idea ever since I heard mad Captain Leopard say that eight from twenty-one leaves thirteen—that Fearless Frank might be the son of that young mother."

The masked stranger started violently.

"He was her child!" he said.

"Then—"

Keno Kit was interrupted by a startling voice.

"I kill the man who deserts his leaders!" rung out on the air, and the pard of the gold-captain turned in time to drop in the flash of Mountain Jule's revolver.

The next moment there was a loud exclamation from Eldorado's lips, and then the clatter of hoofs as a horse sprung down the trail.

"I'll try you one, anyhow, Mountain," said Eldorado, and the report of his revolver joined the echoes of the unexpected shot.

A few yards beyond the light of the torch a human being threw up both hands and then went headlong over the neck of a horse.

Mountain Jules!

Fate had guided the avenging lead to its target.

Scarcely had Keno Kit touched the ground ere he got upon his feet, and came toward the man in the mask with approaching death stamped on every lineament.

"Hear me!" he said to the stranger. "If the boy is the son of the woman murdered on the Santa Fe stage-trail, he is my nephew, for by heavens! she was my sister!"

A wild cry parted the masked man's lips.

The next moment his right hand went up, and the mask was flung madly against the canyon wall.

"Your sister?" he cried clutching the shoulder of Keno Kit as he reeled away. "She was my sister, too! Didn't I pay Captain Leopard for that night's work?"

"Did he kill her?"

"He did, the fiend, and why? Because she chose another man and not him."

"Why didn't I know it when I linked my fortunes to his?" cried Keno Kit. "My mother used to tell me that I had a brother who ran away from home when a boy."

"I'm that brother. I am Paul Prentiss."

There was a leap from a horse and a pair of strong arms went around Keno Kit.

Fearless Frank stood like one spellbound before this singular scene.

"It scoops my rocket," said Eldorado Eph. "It ar' stranger than the mystery ov Don Diavolo's golden tomb."

When Paul Prentiss had lowered Keno Kit to the ground and hastily made him comfortable, he rose before the young miner and held out his hands.

"For the first time for thirteen years, Frank," he said in a voice full of feeling. "Come here!"

The miner of Steeltrap did not hesitate, but sprung forward and found himself locked in a fervent embrace.

"Ah! you don't recognize in me the man who came to Santa Fe suddenly about thirteen years ago, and took you away," he said to Fearless Frank. "I told you then that your mother, who had gone to Pesos del Rio to plant flowers on the grave of your father would not be back for a long time. It was, alas! too true. Captain Leopard, the fiend, had extended her journey into the land of the Unseen. Boy-like, you trusted me then, an' one night when I had put you under the influence of a powerful narcotic, I gave you the gold-map in tattoo. It was already on my breast. Shortly afterward I lost you."

"I ran away," said the youth.

"And afterward turned up in Steeltrap City?"

"Yes."

"Since then I have trailed the murderer. I found him one of the ten thousand who want Don Diavolo's wealth. I found him mad to possess the gold-map, and I made one for the wretch."

The man—no longer a mystery—ceased suddenly at the sound of Eldorado's voice.

"I thought I heard suthin' tumble arter my shot," he said. "I went down the trail a piece ter investigate."

"Wal?"

The question came from Keno Kit, whose eyes were fixed on the old gold-hater.

"Thar's a dead man down yonder," was the answer.

Keno's eyes glistened thankfully.

"I've struck suthin' better than the big bonanza," he said with a smile. "I've found Lucia's heir."

Frank went forward and put his hand in Keno Kit's; there was a convulsive pressure, and as he was drawn down to the desperado, a gasp ended another career!

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AT LAST.

QUEEN BESS was astonished to find herself confronted in the vestibule of the famous gold-cave by the men of Steeltrap.

She did not know even that they had left the camp on the mission which had changed the lives of hundreds during the past fifty years.

She could hardly credit the statement that the mountain pards had been tenanting the cavern for a number of hours and yet had not discovered the treasure it contained.

In an instant a light was struck and she found herself looking down into a large number of familiar faces.

It was the day that succeeded the startling events that have just been detailed in the foregoing chapter, events of which the girl herself, as well as the pards of Steeltrap City, was ignorant.

"This kentry looks like a good one for big bonanzas," said the leader of the miners as he looked up into the young girl's face. "Don't you think it must be somewhat nigh, Bess?"

The Queen of Steeltrap found herself hesitating suspiciously in the presence of the pards.

Should she disclose to them the treasure which had been bidden so long and which she had discovered by accident?

"Ef you know, tell us, Bess!" cried the stalwart fellows as they crowded around her. "We've stood by you through thick an' thin in Steeltrap. We'll let you take yer share an' never growl. Ef we've shook you once since you came among us, seal yer lips!"

It was an appeal almost irresistible.

Bess ran back over her life in a moment as it were.

The men before her, rough and hard though they were, had befriended her on more than one occasion; she could call them friends anywhere, and at all times.

"Why keep the secret from these men? They have mined for years for a pittance. Let me make myself and them glad by making them all gold kings."

A moment later she was on the ground.

"Give me the torch!" she exclaimed as she took the light from the hand that held it.

The miners followed her enthusiastically.

They had found Don Diavolo's wealth at last:

"Be careful; I left two desperate men down there a short time ago," said Queen Bess to the men who surrounded the opening leading down into the treasure pit.

"Only two?" was the sneering rejoinder. "What's a dozen ter thirty who scent the golden priz?"

She tried no more to keep them back, but saw them go down a rope, one after another like human apes.

Their torches explored the pit, and in a corner locked in each others' arms lay two men—dead!

Two red-bladed bowies near by told the story.

"Colonel" Sardine and "Major" Jack had found the bonanza too big to divide, and had fought for it all, with the terrible result just discovered.

Later in that eventful day the gold-cave was invaded by three more men.

In an instant all would have been riddled with bullets by the watchful Steeltrappers if Queen Bess had not flung herself with a cry of mingled joy and remonstrance before their leveled weapons.

There followed a joyful reunion then.

"I told these men the secret, Frank," said the girl to the young man whom she had greeted joyfully. "The old gold-mine has been found at last. There's enough for all."

But Fearless Frank turned away with a shudder.

"Give it to the pards of Steeltrap," he said. "Let them go back, money kings. I feel the cords that Mountain Jules drove into my flesh. With you by me again, Bess, I'm the richest miner in California. And here is one who says that without the gold that has cursed all its possessors, we shall be rich enough," and the young Mazepa of the gold region waved his hand toward Paul Prentiss, late the man of the mask.

It seems that Keno Kit had been taken to a smaller cave after his shooting by Mountain Jules, and that those who were with him had remained at his side till his death.

With him died the last member of the most desperate band of men that ever infested the gold-mountains of California.

The prophecy of the rock, written by the

masked trailer, had met with a literal fulfillment.

California Claude had died on the gold-trail, and would infest the mountain camps with lasso and revolver nevermore.

Captain Leopard, with the map he wanted burned into his breast, had been paid for for his crimes and Bonita Ben and the other gold-desperadoes had either followed or preceded him.

Crooked Tom, the dwarf, had also been unsuccessful, and Keno Kit, the last of the doomed to die, had failed to tread the lost corridors.

There proved to be gold enough for all, and the three pards of Steeltrap went back bonanza princes all.

As for Fearless Frank and Queen Bess, they made a wedding not long after the last events recorded in our mountain history, and in the very shadow of the big mine began a life which has flowed along with nothing to mar its happiness.

Paul Prentiss went to the coast with the young couple, and I believe still occupies a part of the elegant residence, which they call home, in Oakland.

The Steeltrap pards kept the secret of the location of the old Spanish mine until they had stripped it of most of its treasure, when they let it slip, and in an incredibly short space of time the canyon country swarmed with adventurers.

But they arrived too late, and found a comparatively empty hive.

The fortunate "bees" were making a tour of the California towns bucking the tiger and breaking the faro-banks wherever found.

It was flush times for Steeltrap, but they soon played out, and thirty odd "bonanza kings" suddenly found themselves as poor as Eldorado Eph, who had refused to touch a single nugget.

Eldorado Eph, whose wanderings through the mountains did not end in anything definite, although many believed them backed by a strong motive of some kind, left the Gold Range with Fearless Frank, and to-day enjoys the young man's Havanas, while he still smilingly calls himself a "mountain pauper."

We may add that the bones of Don Diavolo and his Indian bride were carefully collected by the lucky Steeltrappers and decently buried, and that nothing was learned of their history more than the vague information contained in the questionable tradition that had existed so many years.

Paul Prentiss has never revealed how he got the gold-chart tattooed on his breast, nor just why he gave it to his nephew, Frank.

Of the existence of the buckskin chart which Eldorado cut up with his bowie in the outset of our romance, he knew nothing until he found it on the person of the strange man found hanging from a lasso in our first chapter.

That man was probably one of California Claude's numerous victims, and one whom, at the time, the famous Curse of the Placers had failed to subject to a close search.

If he had found the golden chart then, some of the most thrilling chapters of our tale of the Sierras might still remain unwritten.

Here let us, reader, at the termination of the great gold-trail, write

THE END.

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